

Design and Care of a Perennial Garden

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March 18, 2017
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Maintenance

A lot depends upon the type of plants that you select. However, there are some details that will always remain. The sequence is more or less in the order of the greatest to least in terms of frequency and time involved. Note – fertilizing is not on the list and is often not necessary.

1. Weeding. Not only does the average weed seed last 7 years, but weeds often resemble desirable plants. As a result, weeding cannot be left to someone who does not know plants.
2. Mulching and removal of frosted materials. Each spring or fall, depending upon the desired winter appearance, the foliage and stems should be cut to the ground and the border mulched with 2-3” of shredded leaves (ideal), mini bark nuggets or 1-2” of shredded bark. The mulch reduces the amount of weeds by reducing the amount of light reaching the soil and conserves moisture.
3. Deadheading and removing tattered foliage. Deadheading is the act of removing spent flowers. Often this will encourage greater flower bloom by reducing the amount of energy the plant spends on seed production. Sometimes, the seed heads should be left, since they provide food for animals or they are simply attractive! Foliage often becomes tattered during the heat of the summer, especially for spring ephemerals, and should be removed as plants enter dormancy.
4. Staking. More important in the classical garden where plants are not ‘dignified’ if they lean against another. In a more contemporary or prairie style, it is proper for plants to be supported or propped up by neighbors.
5. Division. The center of a perennial often consists of the oldest and least vigorous ‘wood’. As a result, the flowers typically are not as robust, are not produced in as much profusion or this region is simply dead! Every 4-25 years, depending upon the plant, the crown should be lifted, the oldest or central portion discarded, new compost added to the soil and a portion of the crown that was located along the outside of the crown replanted. Resist the urge to replace the one plant with 20 divisions, but rather give the divisions to friends or sell them to support your gardening habits! Although this is a task which does not require a huge amount of time, since it happens so infrequently, it does require the greatest amount of effort. A suggestion would be to have a small division party, whereby you invite your gardening friends over to help you divide. You provide the food and beverages – they provide some of the labor and get a few small division with a story!

Design

For the traditional perennial garden, the location should receive a full day of sun and the soil be well drained with a pH around 6.5. Since perennials are not very effective during the winter and early spring months, it is best if the garden has some woody plants combined in the design, or an architectural element as a backbone. Some good backbones include:

- Fence. Simple and inexpensive (comparatively), but will require maintenance over time, such as paint and repairs. Unlike the concept of hedges, which is mentioned below, there are no worries about root competition for water and nutrients.

- Arbor. An interesting way of providing circulation and a view into the back of the garden. Also provides an element upon which vines can be grown, allowing you to get some color up high for nice combinations with some of the taller perennials. It has the same drawbacks and advantages as a fence in terms of maintenance and physiological interactions with the neighboring plants.
- Wall. Initially expensive, but is low in maintenance if was built properly. It typically helps to moderate the extremes in temperature during the summer and winter and creates a microclimate. During winter, it absorbs the heat of the day during helping with cold nights while in summer, it holds the coolness of night, reducing daytime heat. Walls also have the advantage of not competing with the plants for nutrients and water.
- Hedge. Moderately expensive and very attractive if maintained properly. Can be evergreen or deciduous, it does require yearly or twice yearly pruning to keep it looking its best. Often, this involves pruning during the summer while the perennials are at their best. The roots of the hedge also provide a source of frustration for the gardener when they are trying to lift and divide plants.

For perennials, much as with shrubs, it is easiest and often most effective to use masses of three or more perennials for best effect. Some other fun and easy tricks include:

- Make the border as deep as is possible. This allows for greater ease of creating plant combinations and interesting plant mass configurations in the garden.
- Allow the masses to sweep through the garden from front to back, as well as from side to side. If plants are simply in lines parallel to the front of the border, the design becomes very static. If the masses sweep into the back of the garden, it creates depth and interest.
- Repeat plants in various locations of the border, ensuring consistency.
- Place some tall materials to the front of the border and sweep some of the shorter materials to the back. This helps create more three dimensional imagery and continues to break anticipated or static designs in which the tallest material is at the back and the shortest in the front.
- Color combinations are great and at their best when the colors are adjacent to one another. Sounds odd, but often designers will mistakenly select plants that bloom during the same season, but not at the same exact time. Or one will be fading as the other plant is beginning, or one flower is much higher than those adjacent.
- Foliage! Many designers consider perennials mainly for flowers, but forget the impact of silver, chartreuse or dark purple foliage. Foliage is typically present throughout the growing season and makes it easier to design interesting combinations.
- Spikey foliage, such as Yucca, attracts the eye and is useful for moving the eye through the Garden!
- Mowing strips of stone, brick or wood are effective elements to use along the bed lines of perennial borders or wherever you want to maintain the integrity of the bed line shape. For perennial gardens, they are helpful for keeping errant lawnmowers from cutting off flowers that have fallen forward or to prevent weeds in the lawn from wandering into a groundcover mass at the front of the border.
- View of the Garden. Most gardeners setup the border such that it is laid out with the long axis perpendicular to the primary point of viewing. It is often more dramatic to set up the border such that it is parallel to the main axis. By no fault of the plants, there will always be portions of a border that are not in flower. By viewing the border down the length of the garden, the plants compress together and the holes are no longer visible!