

Perennials are plants whose life span extends over several growing seasons. Once established they produce flowers each growing year. “Herbaceous” perennials die back each fall but send out new shoots and flowers in spring from a persistent root stock. Perennials can also be evergreen. To be considered a perennial a plant must normally live at least 3 years in the garden; some will live for generations.

Perennials are delightful additions to your garden. Their beauty increases each succeeding year as they increase in size and flower production. With careful planning, you can have a succession of bloom from early spring to late fall in your perennial border; see our Perennial Bloom Calendar. Since these plants are long-lived additions to your landscape, careful thought should be given to soil preparation and site selection for each plant. The majority of perennials prefer a sunny location, but there are many that perform well in the shade. Sky staff can help you select good performers for your site.

Sun or shade? Just how much sun is enough? Because of our long summer days here in the Northwest, sun-loving perennials will usually do well with a half day of **full** sun. Full morning sun with afternoon shade, or morning shade with sun all afternoon, will usually suffice. How much shade is too much? Keep in mind that no perennial, even a shade lover, will bloom in **deep** shade. Deep shade can be caused by a thick canopy of trees or by tall buildings that block out sunlight all day. In these areas you are better off with foliage plants.

Most perennials love loamy soil that is rich in organic matter. Ideally your soil should be balanced between sand, clay, and silt. Working organic matter into your soil is a sure key to success with perennials. Even those perennials that do well in poor soil will perform even better if you amend the soil with organic matter such as compost or composted manure. Organic matter is the “sponge” in your perennial border that helps your soil retain moisture and nutrients. When preparing the site for your perennials, first work the soil to a depth of 18-20 inches. Then spread your fertilizer, lime, and at least 2 inches of organic matter over the soil and work them in. Water the area for several hours to help settle the soil. Preparing the soil like this will give your perennials a chance to develop a good strong root system, which is the key to their **thriving** and increasing rather than barely surviving. Perennials are not usually too fussy about the pH level of the soil, but most prefer a neutral to slightly acidic soil. In our area, where rhododendrons thrive and heavy winter rains can leach calcium from the soil, it is wise to add a bit of lime to the perennial border.

Fertilizing established perennials should be started when new growth begins to emerge in spring and repeated every 6-8 weeks throughout the growing season. Withhold fertilizer in late summer, fall, and winter so that you do not encourage tender new growth that might be damaged in the winter. We recommend using organic rose and flower food for all perennials that are grown for their flowers. Always use a fertilizer formulated for flowering plants.

For new plantings, we recommend using an organic starter/transplant fertilizer. These products will help prevent transplant shock and encourage new root growth. When you see new growth appearing, fertilize lightly with a Rose and Flower Food. The next feeding in 6-8 weeks can be full strength depending on the plants' size. Repeat thereafter as you would for established plantings.

Mulching the perennial bed is an important step. Mulching helps to conserve moisture, to keep weeds at bay, and to keep the plants' roots at a more even temperature than the air. Apply mulch thickly, but keep it away from the root crowns. Good choices for mulch include compost, composted manure, or ground up and slightly composted leaves. If you use bark for mulch, you may need to add extra nitrogen fertilizer—watch for lighter-colored leaves.

Watering is important while new plants are getting established, during the heat of the summer, and during drought periods. Soak the soil to a reasonable depth each time you water and you'll encourage deep root growth and won't have to water as often. Consider using a drip system or soaker hoses, because overhead sprinkling tends to beat the flowers and foliage and can make them more susceptible to disease if the plants remain wet overnight.

Staking is a must for tall-growing perennials. It is best to get your stakes in while the plants are emerging, rather than waiting until they have attained their full height and start flopping.

During the bloom season, it is important to keep your perennials groomed by removing spent flowers. This stops seed production and encourages the plant to produce more flowers. In the fall before the first killing frost, clean your perennial beds of dead foliage and flowers. This reduces the chance of disease and eliminates places where slugs and insects can hide.

Dividing perennials is a common method of increasing your stock. Root formation of perennials varies according to the variety, but the majority of perennials spread by the development of growth buds or eyes. To propagate, separate these growth buds from the parent plant. Some perennials, such as daylilies and peonies, have fleshy rootstocks. When you dig them up you can either gently pull the intertwined roots apart or cut them with a knife. Tuberous-rooted plants such as iris have stems that branch out at or below the soil surface. At each node there will be a bud and one or more roots. Each division needs one or more buds to develop into a new plant. Perennials such as Heuchera or Ajuga develop many crowns. These types can be carefully dug, their crowns pulled apart, and replanted separately. Division gives you a source of new plants and will also help rejuvenate old, overcrowded parent plants. As a rule of thumb, divide spring-blooming perennials in the summer, and divide summer and fall blooming perennials in early spring.

The possibilities are endless when gardening with perennials, and the rewards are many. There's something about seeing the first signs of growth emerging in the spring that assures us that spring has definitely come once again!