

# What is a perennial?

Technically speaking, perennials are plants that live and bloom for more than 2 years. This is in contrast to annuals, such as petunias, that live for one year and then die. Some varieties of perennials are short-lived (lasting 3-4 years) but many are very long lived. Peonies have been known to live 100 years or more!

When we think of perennials, we typically think of ornamental plants like the daisies or daylilies we have in our gardens. Perennials come in all shapes, sizes, and colors. One of the best things about perennials is that you only have to plant them once and then they come back bigger and better every year. Many perennials can be divided every 3-4 years, so you'll have plenty to plant in other parts of your garden or share with friends. An important distinction between annuals and perennials is that most perennials need to be vernalized (exposed to cold temperatures for a prolonged period of time) in order to bloom every year. Most perennials bloom once per season, but some rebloom again in late summer or fall. Relatively recent advancements in hybridizing have yielded a growing number of perennials that bloom continuously for many months at a time. Other perennials, such as hostas and ferns, are grown for their beautifully decorative foliage rather than flowers.

# How do I use perennials in my garden?

There are lots of ways to use perennials in the landscape. Mixed gardens are very popular, combining annuals, perennials, and woody plants all together. Sometimes a single variety of perennial is planted in a large drift alongside a driveway or fence line. Decorative planters filled with a mix of annuals and perennials are becoming popular. There are many perennials that have interesting foliage that combine well with annuals and do well in pots.

Of the thousands of perennials available today, there are some suitable to all kinds of growing environments: sun, shade, hot & dry, cold & wet, and everything in between.

# Where to start.

- Sun exposure- how much sun will hit this area? Early spring, when the leaves from your trees haven't fully leafed out, will only give you sun in the Spring.
- Water- hand water or sprinkler? The first season perennials need more water to get them established. Then most only need to be watered if we don't get enough rain fall.
- Bloom times- Most perennials have their own bloom time. With a well thought out plan, you can plant a variety of plants so you have something blooming Spring, Summer and Fall. Think about when you will be outside in the garden the most.
- If you are going to use shrubs in your perennial border, put them in first. Mature perennials are easier to move than a mature shrub.
- Fertilize your garden in the spring and 1 or 2 times after that about a month apart. A multi purpose food like Espoma's Plant-Tone is easy to apply and organic.
- Consider using garden ornaments like an arbor, obelisk, or birdbath to enhance the space. They can provide height to your garden.

- A perennial border takes time to evolve. It is not easy to install a new garden over a weekend. Not all plants are available for purchase at the same time. So many of us want to be done in the garden by Memorial Day and end up with just spring flowering plants. Stop by Stables Garden Center once a month to see what's new and in flower. Leave space in your garden for those later blooming plants.
- As you finish planting your garden, add mulch. It does 2 things- Slows down weeds and keeps in the moisture.
- As the flowers finish blooming, be sure to prune the spent blooms. Sometimes that keeps them blooming longer. If plants become messy after flowering, try pruning them back.
- In the fall, cut back all your plants to the ground. It's easier to do then rather than in the spring. You don't want to disturb any of the new growth popping up in spring.

**Sources:** [www.perennialresource.com/](http://www.perennialresource.com/)  
[www.cornell.edu/search/](http://www.cornell.edu/search/)