

Annuals, Biennials, & Perennials

Overview

Gardeners have numerous choices – sometimes far too many – for their ornamental flower gardens, in part defined by the plants' lifestyles.

Annual plants live for just a season. Even so, we require they produce abundant showy blossoms for an extended while before they die.

Biennials live for two years. The first year they produce only a short stem and leaves, then will bloom the second year.

Perennial plants, though, live three or more years, typically with the first flowering cycle during the second year. Short-lived kinds do well for just a few years whereas long-lived types may last for decades.

Selecting your plants

When purchasing your annuals, biennials and perennials, select vigorous specimens having completely hydrated leaves and a healthy green color. Root tips should be a creamy-white color; check their condition by sliding the root ball out of the pot, then, of course, carefully replace the root ball.

Avoid plants with broken stems; dry, wilting, or yellow leaves; or damage from insects or disease. The plant should fill out the container but the roots shouldn't hang out the drainage holes. Dangling roots are likely late in the season, after plants have been held too long in the same size pot.

As tempting as it is to buy annuals in full bloom, a far better choice is compact, well-branched, and well-budded plants. Flowering will be delayed for a while but with the bonus that the plant will live longer and ultimately flower more profusely.

In the garden center, look for biennials in the annual or perennial section. Among the popular biennials are foxglove, also various campanulas such as Canterbury bell and chimney flower.

Perennials, whether evergreen or deciduous, are classified as hardy (survive frost), or tender (damaged by frost). In our region, perennials will be hardy if they are labeled for USDA zone 7 or 8, or Sunset zone 6. Zones for local gardens can vary due to elevation.

Tender perennials can add variety and beauty to your garden when you grow them as you would annuals. To grow them again next season, put them in a sheltered place for the winter.

Many flower bulbs are reliable perennials in our region, with daffodils and crocus perhaps the most common. But lilies and dahlias do well, too; plant the lilies 4 to 6 inches deep, the dahlias at 7 to 8 inches deep. Tulips aren't likely to return the second year

unless they are in an area which remains dry during the summer. Among tulips, the various relatively small species are generally more reliable than are the larger-flowered hybrids.

Choosing the planting site

The printed label that comes with your purchased transplants typically indicates the best conditions of sun or shade, also moist or dry soil.

Most annuals, biennials and perennials do very well with morning sun and with protection from the hot afternoon sun; four hours of bright light is a minimum, six is better. Others do well with some shade.

All plants thrive in soil that drains well.

Planting

Certain annuals, biennials and perennials can be seeded directly into the garden while others are best started indoors. The seed packet will state the best planting time, also spacing in the garden.

Or you can purchase young transplants for immediate gratification.

For the most part, all annuals, biennials and perennials do best if planted in the garden at the same depth as they were in the original pot.

The majority of plants do best in well-drained soil. To prepare the garden bed, begin by removing rocks and weeds from the area, then amend your soil by mixing in at least two inches of compost to improve drainage in clayey soils and increase water retention in sandy soils. Amend again during each successive planting season.

Another tip for success is to make certain your plants and their root systems are thoroughly moist before you set them into moist garden soil.

To give your plants a running start, mix fertilizer into the soil as you put each plant in place. You can use a slow release fertilizer or a combination of an all-purpose fertilizer and bone meal. Follow label directions as to the amount.

Finally, use fertilizer-enriched water diluted to half-strength to settle the soil around the plants' roots.

Watering

Most annuals have fairly shallow roots, thus may need to be watered rather frequently. Wilting, even if minor, permanently stunts plants; your annuals will stall and blooms will be fewer than normal.

Biennials and perennials require regularly scheduled watering during the first season in order to

establish sturdy root systems. Each time you water, moisten the entire root zone which, on average, is about 12 to 15 inches deep.

Water early in the day so that the leaves dry before nightfall. Better yet, water at the plant's base.

Fertilizing

Annuals, because we expect them to be very productive during their brief life, benefit from regular doses of water-soluble, all-purpose fertilizer once or twice a month. You can apply additional doses if the plants lag.

Biennials and perennials will thrive with little or no supplemental fertilizer. This is an instance where our clayey soils come in handy, they provide a slow but steady flow of required fertilizer elements. Perennials tend to develop rather slowly into sturdy plants; but if they're fertilized, they may flop and may even bloom less than you expect.

Don't fertilize biennials and perennials in the fall because the plants need to shut down for winter. You don't want to encourage any new growth late in the year which might be damaged by cold.

Summer maintenance

Some annuals, among them impatiens and fibrous begonias, are self-cleaning in that you don't need to remove their spent flowers. But most annuals need to be deadheaded; that is, have their spent flowers removed.

If you don't deadhead, the plants start producing seed and are likely to stop blooming. You can groom the plants at the same time by removing dying or dead leaves or branches.

Additional information

Many books about growing annuals, biennials and perennials are available at the library and your book seller.

These are just a few you might find useful:

Armitage's Annuals: A Color Encyclopedia by Allan M. Armitage

Armitage's Manual of Annuals, Biennials, and Half-Hardy Perennials by Allan M. Armitage

Herbaceous Perennial Plants by Allan M. Armitage

Garden Perennials by Allan M. Armitage

The Well-Tended Perennial Garden by Tracy DiSabato-Aust

Sunset Western Garden Book

The AHS A-Z Encyclopedia of Garden Plants

Master Gardener™ Advice

- Call Home Horticulture Helpline: 503-655-8631 (Clackamas County), 503-821-1150 (Washington County), or 503-445-4608 (Multnomah County).
- For more 10-Minute University™ handouts and class schedule, visit www.cmastergardeners.org or www.metromastergardeners.org.
- Look for Master Gardeners at area Farmers' Markets.

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It's also important to deadhead perennials so that they won't set seed, but will continue to bloom as long as possible.

Fall maintenance

As you probably know, annuals are removed, then discarded or composted, at the end of the season.

On the other hand, first-season biennials will be a rosette of nicely green leaves which will persist through the winter. The only tidying you need do is to remove any yellowed leaves which may be present. When growth resumes in spring, the flower stem will extend upward to produce the expected floral display.

You can cut most herbaceous perennials to the ground when they start to look ratty in late fall. Even so, some will have attractive seed heads you may want to retain during the winter for the birds, or simply because they add interesting details to the scene. Others, among them various ornamental grasses, can provide winter interest with their tawny-colored blades.

Some perennials don't reappear aboveground until relatively late in spring. With these, you may want to retain part of the stalk to mark the location so you won't disturb the root system while weeding or planting.

Evergreen perennials are generally cut back in spring, just before new growth begins. Delaying until spring is particularly important with such warmth-requiring perennials as lavender, rosemary and sage.

With time, clumping perennials get crowded, flower less, and begin to decline. To refresh them, dig and divide the clump just before new growth begins, then replant in newly amended soil. A few, such as peonies and hosta, will thrive in the same place for many years.