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## Planning a perennial garden

James R. Feucht<sup>1</sup>

### Quick Facts

Plan a flower garden on paper first to avoid costly errors.

Before a plan is developed, choose the garden location and note soil and exposure conditions.

Flower beds are easier to maintain when they are no deeper than 4 feet when viewed from one side, or no deeper than 8 feet when viewed from two or more sides.

Add organic matter to improve drainage and aeration.

Consider shade tolerance, plant height, color and variety when selecting plants.

### Introduction

A carefully planned flower garden can avoid costly errors. Mistakes on paper are easy to correct.

Before the plan is prepared, choose the garden location. Note the soil conditions, exposure to sunlight and points from which it will be viewed. The primary consideration when deciding the size of an area should be based upon the amount of time and energy one will be able to devote to the garden. A small, neatly maintained garden is better than a larger, poorly kept one.

Locate a flower garden in an area with ample sunlight for different varieties of flowers to grow and be visible from a picture window, patio or other vantage point. It also is best to have some kind of background – a fence, wall, shrub or hedge. The flower garden should fit into the total landscape of the property.

### Size, Shape and Design

There are no set rules to determine the size and shape of the flower bed. If a formal effect is desired, the outline of the beds should be in straight lines (such as paralleling a fence) and symmetrical

in shape. Informal effects are obtained with “free-flow” outlines and asymmetrical shapes.

While size depends on the space available, from a practical standpoint flower beds are easier to maintain when they are no deeper than 4 feet if accessible from only one side, or no deeper than 8 feet if accessible from at least two sides.

A simple method for laying out a flower bed is to make a sketch on graph paper, assigning the squares a given scale (i.e., one square: 6 inches). Then proceed as follows:

1. locate structures, such as fences, walls, walks;
2. locate existing shrubs, trees and other permanent plants – these can be used for reference points in laying out the design;
3. sketch lightly (in soft pencil) the desired outline of the bed or beds;
4. determine the number of squares between reference points and bed outline;
5. measure corresponding distances on the ground and outline the bed area with string (in free-flow or curved edges, use a garden hose for temporary outline);
6. use plan to mark locations of plants.

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<sup>1</sup>James R. Feucht, Colorado State University Cooperative Extension landscape plants specialist and professor; horticulture (revised 9/92). Some recommendations change regularly, please contact your Colorado State University Cooperative Extension county office for current recommendations.

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## Soil Preparation

A good flower garden cannot be grown in poor soil. Most important are the subsoil drainage and aeration. Add organic matter (peat, leaf mold, etc.) to help hold water in a sandy soil and to open up a clay soil. Generally, about 2 inches of peat will help a clay soil. Thoroughly mix the organic matter into the soil by spading or rototilling.

The best time to prepare soil in a flower bed is in the fall. If organic matter is spaded in the fall and the soil is left loose and lumpy, freezing and thawing during winter will break down the clods into a mellow, workable soil by spring.

## Selecting Plants

Follow these principles to obtain the best results.

- Select plants suitable to the site; i.e., sun-loving versus shade-tolerant.

- Choose plants according to height to provide variety. Place taller plants toward the back of the border (or in the center in gardens viewed from two or more sides).

- Choose sufficient variety to obtain continuous color throughout the season but avoid so many types that a hodgepodge effect is created.

- Use the same variety in groups and repeat the groups in several areas in the garden.

- Use groupings of the same color for effectiveness. Except for edging, do not plant flowers in rows in flower gardens.

- Define the flower bed with one or more low-growing "edging" plant types.

- Use tall spike-like plants and those with stark white or brilliant color to accent an area of the garden. Avoid overuse. Remember, accents in a garden are like spices in foods – a little goes a long way, and too much destroys the effect.

**Table 1. A selection of perennial flowers.**

Plant Name	Flower Colors	Flowering Period*	Height (feet)***	Remarks
Alyssum (Golden)	Yellow	April	1	Dry, sunny areas. Reseeds readily.
Anchusa (Italian)	Deep blue	June-July	3-5	Tall accent. Does well in moist soils.
Aster (New England)	Purple, white	Sept.	4-5	Showy for fall. Needs space.
Baby's Breath	White	July-Sept.	2.5	Large, bell-like flowers.
Beebalm	Crimson, pink	June-Aug.	2-3	Mass plantings showy. Cut old flowers.
*Bellflower	Blue	June-July	2	Can become a pest.
Black-eyed Susan	Yellow	July	2-3	Showy. Common along roadsides.
*Blanket Flower	Various	All summer	2	Showy, daisy-like flowers.
*Bleeding Heart	Deep pink	April-June	1.5	Good for shady spots, shrub borders.
Campion	Red, crimson	June-Aug.	1.5-2	Resembles Pinks. (Dianthus).
Candytuft	White	April-June	1	Foliage evergreen. Water in dry winters.
*Canterbury Bells	Pink, purple, white	June-July	3	Very large bells. An accent.
Cardinal Flower	Bright red	July-Sept.	2	Best in damp soils, shady spots.
Chrysanthemum	Various	Sept.-Oct.	1-3	Cut flower. Excellent for fall. Many hybrids.
*Columbine	Various	May-June	1-2	
*Coneflower	Yellow	Aug.-Sept.	6-8	Tall background. Needs room.
Coral Bells	Crimson, pink, white	May-Aug.	1.5	Excellent for edging.
Coreopsis	Yellow	June-Aug.	3	Useful in any garden.
Cornflower	Blue, white	May-Sept.	2	Border plant. Cut flower.
*Daisy (Painted)	Various	May-July	2-3	Provides brilliant color.
Daisy (Shasta)	White	July-Aug.	2-2.5	Massive shrub-like clumps develop.
Daylily	Yellow, red, orange	June-July	2-2.5	Practically no maintenance needed.
*Delphinium (Hybrids)	White, blue, purple	June-July	4-6	Popular accent. May need staking.
Dragon's Head (False)	Lilac, white	June-Sept.	3-3.5	Good late flower for cutting.
*Flax (Blue)	Blue	May-Sept.	1.5	Showy, bushy plants.
Gas Plant	White, pink	June-July	2-3	Need ample space. Shady areas.
Globe Flower	Yellow	May-Aug.	2	Looks like a large buttercup.
Golden Glow ( <i>Rudbeckia laciniata</i> )	Yellow	July-Sept.	5-6	Popular late summer flower.
Harebell (Carpathian)	Blue, white	June-Oct.	1	A matted plant useful for edging.
Hollyhock	Various	June-Sept.	4-8	Accent. Grows almost anywhere.
Hosta	White, lilac	June-July	2.5	Shady spots.
Iris (dwarf)	Various	April	3/4	Edging.
*Iris (bearded)	Various	May	2	Hundreds of varieties.
Iris (Siberian)	Purple, white	Late May, early June	2.5	Moist soil.
Lavender	Light blue	July-Aug.	1	Fragrant herb.
Lupine	Various	June-Aug.	2.5-3	Reseeds readily.
Monkshood	White, violet	June-Sept.	4-5	Moist, shady spots.
*Moss Pink (Cottage)	Various	May	3/4	Edging.
Pansy	Various	April-May	.5	Good for early color. Edging.
Pansy (Tufted)	Various	May-Sept.	.5	Good for early color. Edging.
*Penstemon	Red, white, purple	June-July	2-3	Several types available.
Peony	White, pink, red	Late May-June	2-2.5	Provide good soil drainage.
Phlox	White, lavender	May	1-1.5	A good garden filler.
*Poppy (Iceland)	Various	April-June	1	Edging plant.
*Poppy (Oriental)	Orange, scarlet, salmon	June-July	2-3	Showy. Hot, dry spots.
Primrose	Yellow, red, blue	April-May	.5	Good in shade.
Red-hot Poker	Red, orange	Aug.-Oct.	3/4	Showy accent. Cut flower.
Scabiosa	Lavender	June-Sept.	1.5-2	Good cutting flower.
Sedum ( <i>spectabilis</i> )	Rose, lavender	Aug.-Sept.	1.5	For late color.
Speedwell	Blue	June	1	Showy spikes.
Sunflower	Yellow	July-Sept.	4-8	Tall background.
*Sweet William	Various	May	2	A border plant.
Thrift	Pink	May-Aug.	1	Edging. Long blooming.
Violet	Purple, white	April-May	.5	Filler plant for shady areas.
Yarrow	Yellow	July-Sept.	4-5	For the poorest soil.

\*Time of flowering is approximate for central Colorado. In Wyoming and other northern states, flowering may be 2 to 3 weeks later.

\*\*Particularly suited for mountain gardens up to 10,000 feet (3,048 meters) elevation.

\*\*\*To convert to metrics, use the following equivalent: 1 foot = 30.5 centimeters.