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Garden perennials: planting and care

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Quick Facts

- Initial planning is important to successfully grow garden perennials.
- Soil preparation is the most important step in establishing a perennial garden.
- Unless plants are obtained in peat pots, the pot must be removed from the soil ball before planting.
- Some larger plants require stakes or other supports to avoid wind damage.
- Most perennials eventually become crowded and require careful attention when divided and replanted.
- After a year or two, some perennials may require fertilization.



Herbaceous garden perennials can remain in one place, undisturbed, for several years. However, due to increased yearly growth, most plants ultimately crowd each other, resulting in the deterioration of strong healthy stems and poor flowering. Insects, diseases and soil conditions also may cause poor development and eventual destruction of the plants. Thus, initial planning and occasional care following planting are necessary to maintain garden perennials.

Soil Preparation

The most important phase in producing a satisfactory perennial garden is soil preparation before planting. Few perennials do well in heavy, poorly drained and unaerated soils. It is difficult to improve soil aeration and drainage in a perennial garden once the plants are in place.

Prior to planting, compost, aged barnyard manure or any other suitable organic material

should be added and spaded into the upper 10 to 12 inches of soil. It also is desirable to incorporate phosphate fertilizer into the soil with the organic material at a rate of 1 pound per 100 square feet of area. If coarse sawdust is applied, a nitrogen fertilizer should be applied before spading at a rate of 1 pound for every bushel applied. A well-prepared soil is easy to cultivate, provides good water percolation and allows the perennial plants to develop for years.

Once the soil is prepared, develop a planting program built around color, flowering period, foliage texture and other plant characteristics. (See Service in Action sheet 7.405, *Planning a perennial garden.*)

Planting

Most perennials are available as "well established" plants in containers and can be planted anytime during the growing season. Containers made of metal, plastic, fiber, clay or other durable

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materials must be removed from around the soil ball before planting. In most cases the containers can be removed by holding the plant upside down, tapping the container lightly on a piece of wood, and "catching" the plant as the soil ball is separated from the container. Soil balls with masses of roots around the outer perimeter should be shallowly cut in several places to provide better root contact with the soil bed when planted. Plants grown in peat pots may be planted "pot and all" after breaking or slicing the sides and top rim to prevent root restriction. Peel off or plant below the flower bed level to prevent a "wick" effect, which causes the soil ball to dry out.

There is no set recommendation for planting distances. They vary with the character of plant growth and how quickly immediate perfection is wanted. Dwarf, intermediate and tall perennials may be planted 6 to 12 inches, 12 to 18 inches and 18 to 36 inches apart, respectively. Plants should not be placed in straight rows, but scattered so that one mass blends into the other. Place some intermediate plants in the foreground and a few tall ones in the middle of the perennial bed.

Only remove plants from containers that can be planted immediately. Store the remainder in a cool, shaded location until planting time.

Planting depth of container-grown perennials should be the same as the level of the soil ball. The soil should be firmed, not packed, around the ball and watered immediately. Make periodic checks to see that a crack does not separate the soil ball and soil in the bed. If a crack appears, a second watering or light cultivation may be necessary to cover the exposed soil ball.

Care of Established Perennials

Other than normal watering or insect and weed control practices, perennials need little care during the first year or two. Tall perennials, such as delphinium, may need to be staked to keep them from being blown over. A thin, but stout piece of bamboo is ideal for this purpose. Soft string or plastic covered wire can be used to tie plant stems to the stakes. Tying the flower stalks too tightly may cause a girdling injury. To support large clumps, such as peonies, three or four stakes may be inserted into the soil around the outer perimeter of the plant and soft string tied from one to another, forming a fence. A 15- to 18-inch wire border fence also is ideal to hold clump types in position. If green string, bamboo or fencing is used, there will be little detracting from the beauty of the garden.

Dividing Perennials

Most perennials spread by side shoots (offsets), runners or rhizomes and eventually become crowded. Crowding often contributes to low quality flowers and in excessive cases they may completely fail to bloom. The aggressive creepers, shasta daisy, oriental poppy and iris can be kept vigorous by dividing them approximately every

third year. The less aggressive types, delphinium and peony, may only need dividing after four or more years, depending on soil conditions and general health of the plants.

Perennials that bloom in the spring and early summer (peonies and poppies) usually are divided in the fall or when the foliage dies (early September through October). Medium to late summer and fall flowering types (chrysanthemums and aster) should be divided in early spring before growth begins. Iris and day lilies usually are divided immediately after flowering.

Use a spade, shovel or spading fork to dig around and under the entire plant and lift it out of the soil. Remove the large clods of soil from the roots by hand and wash the remainder off with the garden hose.

Cut apart the healthiest portions of the root system with a sharp knife or pruning shears. Uncrushed divisions with two to five eyes will provide vigorous transplants that usually do better than the large divisions. Discard the diseased and dead portions of the plant materials. Wrap the healthy division in moist burlap or temporarily cover with moist soil until replanting time. When unforeseen conditions prevent immediate planting of divisions, they may be wrapped in moist paper and plastic film and placed in a refrigerator for a few days. The unplanted divisions should be kept out of the sun.

Replanting Divisions

Replant divided perennials as soon as possible. Rework the old soil bed as described in the beginning of this fact sheet. Dig holes large enough to accept the roots without crowding and backfill so the crowns (the area where tops and roots join) are barely covered with soil. Peony divisions, if planted too deep, often will fail to bloom. After any divisions are planted, they must be watered well, and some protection from the sun is desirable for a few days.

When replanting perennials divided in late summer or fall, apply a mulch to the surrounding soil to help conserve moisture and prevent early freezing of soil. This will help the root system become reestablished before winter. SIA 7.214, *Mulches for home grounds*, explains suitable mulching materials.

Fertilization

Established perennials may need supplemental nutrients after a year or two, depending on soil and prior soil preparation. If the plants do not seem thrifty and if yellowing of the leaves occurs, a nitrogen deficiency may be the problem. Soil tests can be obtained by consulting the local county Cooperative Extension office.

Application of 2 to 3 pounds per 100 square feet of a 5-10-5 fertilizer in early spring usually is sufficient each year. Water the fertilizer into the soil well. Wash off fertilizer that lands on the foliage.