

Gardening with Perennials in Harris County

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Perennials are plants that live more than two years. Woody plants such as trees and shrubs are perennial in growth habit, but when it is used by gardeners, the term “perennials” usually refers to perennial herbaceous plants. Examples of herbaceous perennials familiar to local gardeners include butterfly weed, coneflower and blanketflower.

The most obvious advantage of gardening with perennials is that new plants do not have to be set out every year as is the case with annuals. A carefully planned perennial garden can produce color throughout the season and provide years of beauty and enjoyment. Perennials often require less maintenance than annual flowers. After they are established, perennials are usually more pest-resistant and need less water.

Bed Preparation

Site selection

The same aspects of site selection that would be considered for other ornamentals should also guide the choice of location for perennials: sunlight (full sun to heavy shade), slope of the site (affects temperature and drainage), soil type, and the roles plants will play in the garden. Site selection is especially important with perennials as they are usually left in the same location for several years. Planting groups of the same kind of plant in clumps or drifts provides more visual impact than a single plant and is generally more pleasing, unless a single plant is being used as a specimen plant for dramatic impact.

Soil preparation

Preparing the soil is extremely important. If possible, begin preparing the soil for new beds well before planting time. Start by having the soil tested to determine its pH value as well as the level of nutrients essential to plant growth. Materials applied to the soil to make adjustments to its pH generally need time to work. Check to be sure the site is well-drained yet still has some water-holding capacity.

Just before planting, spade in recommended amounts of fertilizer. If phosphorus is being added, be sure to work it deeply into the soil where plant roots can reach it. Rake the soil surface smooth.

Plant Selection

It is best to select plants with a specific purpose in mind, such as edging plants, accent or focal point plants, masses of color, rock garden specimens, etc. Choose plants for color, bloom period, height, and light requirements. Research their growing requirements and environmental preferences and group plants accordingly. For example, place drought-tolerant plants together at the top of a slope or raised

bed and moisture-loving plants in low spots where runoff collects.

Consider the suitability of plants to the local climate and remember that many plants sold by some major chain stores may not fare well in the Gulf Coast region because they are shipped from other regions with totally different climates.

For a few suggestions for local gardeners, see the partial list of perennials at the end of this fact sheet. The list includes some herbaceous perennials and a few perennial bulbs that grow well in the Houston area. Also notice which plant species and varieties are good performers in gardens near your neighborhood. If you have questions about a particular plant variety, you can call the Harris County Ask a Master Gardener helpline at 281.855.5600 and discuss with a local Extension-trained volunteer whether it is likely to be a good choice for your garden.

Maintenance

Planting

Generally, late summer or fall flowering perennials are planted in the spring, while spring flowering perennials are planted in late summer or fall. However, it is wise to check exact planting dates for specific perennials. Regardless of planting time, allow perennials sufficient time to become established before they bloom or before the onset of cold weather.

Plenty of space should be allowed between plants because most perennials spread quickly and need room to develop. Perennials usually show up best when planted in clumps or groups of plants of the same variety.

Water

Proper watering promotes good root development. When watering, make sure that all the roots are reached. In our area, do not forget to water occasionally in winter as the root systems of perennials continue to be active through the dormant season.

Mulch

Mulch gives an orderly look to the landscape, reduces weed growth, affects soil temperatures, and is very useful in maintaining uniform moisture conditions. Bark, pine needles and shredded leaves are common organic mulches used in perennial beds. These materials add some nutrients and humus to the soil, improving its moisture-holding capacity.

Fertilization

Because perennial plantings can rob the soil of its natural fertility, regular fertilization with a balanced fertilizer is necessary. However, do not over-fertilize perennials; a light fertilization program gives a continuous supply of nutrients sufficient to produce healthy plants. Broadcast the fertilizer through the bed in March; repeat the application two more times at six-week intervals. Apply another fertilizer treatment to late-blooming plants in late summer. Always water the bed after applying fertilizer. This washes fertilizer off the foliage and prevents burn. It also makes fertilizer immediately available to the plants.

Deadheading

After perennials have bloomed, remove spent flowers. Cut flower stems down to healthy leaves or to the ground if there are no more buds.

Disbudding

To gain large blooms from perennials instead of more numerous but smaller blooms, disbud them. In disbudding, small side buds are removed, allowing the plant to concentrate its energy on producing one or a few large blooms. Chrysanthemums are an example of perennials that are often disbudded.

Staking

Most erect perennials are top-heavy, and the taller varieties generally need to be staked. If a plant falls over, its stem will function poorly where it has been bent. If the stem is cracked, disease organisms can penetrate the break. Stake plants when setting them out so that they will grow to cover the stakes. Stakes can be made of any material and should be 6 to 12 inches shorter than the mature height of the plant. Loosely tie plants to the stakes using paper-covered wire, plastic or other soft material.

Fall care

In the fall, after the foliage of warm-season perennials has died, remove dead leaves, stems and spent flowers. These materials often harbor insects and disease-causing organisms. Apply winter mulch after the soil temperature drops.

Propagation

Much of the enjoyment gardeners experience with growing perennials is associated with propagation. Understanding the art of propagation is a key step to experiencing the glory of perennial gardening. Although many perennials can easily be started from seed, most of them may take a couple of years to flower. A quicker way to have blooming plants is by vegetative propagation, either by dividing old plants or by taking cuttings.

Division

Most perennials left in the same place for more than three years are likely to become overgrown and overcrowded. Flowers tend to be sparse and growth poor. The clump depletes the fertility of the soil as the plant crowds itself.

To divide mature clumps of perennials, select only vigorous side shoots from the outer part of the clump. Divide the plant into clumps of three to five shoots each. Divide perennials in fall so they can become established before winter frosts or freezes, or divide when the plants are dormant just before a new growth season.

Cuttings

Many plants can be propagated from either tip or root cuttings. Generally, tip cuttings are easier to propagate than root cuttings.

With tip cuttings such as dianthus and phlox, select second growth for cuttings. Make tip cuttings 3–6 inches long. Treat the base of the cutting with a rooting hormone. Leave all foliage on the cutting except the part that will be below the soil line. Insert one cutting per rooting medium. Plant tip cuttings in peat pots and place them in a lightly shaded area. Cover with a sheet of clear plastic. Check regularly to make sure the cuttings do not dry out. When cuttings do not easily pull out of the soil, they have begun to root. Make holes in the plastic sheet to increase the exposure of cuttings to air; this hardens the cuttings. Every few days, make new holes or enlarge the existing holes.

With root cuttings such as phlox, baby's breath and oriental poppy, dig the plants in late summer after they have bloomed. Select pencil-sized roots and cut them into 4-inch sections. Place each piece in a rooting medium. Prepare a tray of propagation pots. Use two parts sand, one part soil and one part peat moss for the soil mix. Water thoroughly.

A Partial List of Perennials for the Houston Landscape					
Common Name	Botanical Name	Propagation	Flower Color	Bloom Season	Height
aster **	<i>Aster</i> spp.	cuttings, division	lavender	fall	3'
autumn sage (salvia) * – **	<i>Salvia greggii</i>	cuttings, seed	white, red, pink	spring, summer, fall	2–3'
butterfly weed **	<i>Asclepias tuberosa</i>	seed	yellow/red	summer	2'
cigar plant **	<i>Cuphea micropetala</i>	cuttings, division	red/yellow	summer, fall	3'–4'
columbine	<i>Aquilegia</i> sp.	seed, division	yellow	spring	18"
comfrey *	<i>Symphytum officinale</i>	division	white, yellowish, purple, rose	summer	3'
common thyme *	<i>Thymus vulgaris</i>	cuttings, division	----	----	6"
coreopsis **	<i>Coreopsis</i> spp.	seed, division	yellow	late spring, summer	2'–3'
corn flag	<i>Gladiolus byzantinus</i>	division (corms)	purple, white	summer	3'
daffodils, narcissus	<i>Narcissus</i> spp.	division	yellow, white	spring	1'
daylily **	<i>Hemerocallis</i> spp.	division	many	spring, summer	1'–3'
dianthus	<i>Dianthus</i> spp.	cuttings, division	many	spring	1'
fall aster **	<i>Aster oblongifolius</i>	cuttings, division	lavender	fall	3'
garden canna	<i>Canna x generalis</i>	division, tubers	yellow, red, pink, salmon	summer	2'–4'
garlic, chives *	<i>Allium</i> spp.	division	white	summer	1'
gladiolus	<i>Gladiolus</i> spp.	division of corms	many	summer	3'
ground orchid, Chinese	<i>Bletilla striata</i>	division	purple, white	spring	1'–2'
Indian blanket	<i>Gaillardia</i> spp.	seed, division	red-yellow blend	spring, summer, fall	18"
Louisiana iris	<i>Iris fulva</i> x <i>I. gigantea</i> x <i>I. foliosa</i>	division, seed	many	spring	3'
Maximilian sunflower	<i>Helianthus maximiliani</i>	seed, division	yellow	late summer, fall	3'–4'
mealy cup sage *	<i>Salvia farinacea</i>	seed, division	blue, white, purple	spring, summer, fall	2'–3'
Mexican marigold-mint *	<i>Tagetes lucida</i>	cuttings, division	yellow	summer, fall	2'

* Herbs – Only some varieties of violets and verbena apply.

** Nectar plants that attract butterflies and hummingbirds.

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Common Name	Botanical Name	Propagation	Flower Color	Bloom Season	Height
milk and wine lily	<i>Crinum zeylanicum</i>	division	white, rose, pink & Striped	spring, summer, fall	2'–4'
obedient plant	<i>Physostegia virginiana</i>	division	lavender, white	summer	3'
oxblood lily	<i>Rhodophiala bifida</i>	division	dark red	fall	1'
oxeye daisy	<i>Chrysanthemum leucanthemum</i>	division, seed	white	spring	3'
peppermint*	<i>Mentha x piperita</i>	cuttings, division	----	-----	1'
perennial phlox **	<i>Phlox paniculata</i>	cuttings, division	lavender, pink, white	summer	2'
pink rain lily	<i>Zephyranthes grandiflora</i>	division	pink	summer	1'
purple coneflower **	<i>Echinacea purpurea</i>	seed, division	purple	spring, summer, fall	1'–2'
red spider lily	<i>Lycoris radiata</i>	division	coral-red, white, yellow	fall	1'
rock rose	<i>Pavonia lasiopetala</i>	cuttings, seed	pink	spring, summer, fall	3'–4'
shrimp plant **	<i>Justicia brandegeana</i>	division, cuttings	yellow or red-brown	summer, fall	3'
sweet violet *	<i>Viola odorata</i>	division	purple	winter, spring	6" –8"
trailing lantana **	<i>Lantana montevidensis</i>	division, seed, cuttings	many	spring, summer, fall	1'–2'
Turk's cap **	<i>Malvaviscus drummondii</i>	seed, cuttings	red	spring, summer, fall	3'–4'
verbena * – **	<i>Verbena hybrida</i>	seed, division	many	spring, summer, fall	6"–1'
white rain lily	<i>Zephyranthes candida</i>	division	white	summer	1'
yarrow*	<i>Achillea</i> spp.	seed, division	white, rose, yellow	summer	1'
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** Nectar plants that attract butterflies and hummingbirds.					



Gardening fact sheets are distributed by Harris County Master Gardeners, community volunteers trained in basic horticulture by the Texas AgriLife Extension Service. For information about Master Gardener volunteer training classes, call Harris County Cooperative Extension at 281.855.5600, or send an e-mail to harris@ag.tamu.edu.