

ALABAMA COOPERATIVE EXTENSION SYSTEM/ LIMESTONE COUNTY OFFICE

The Garden Spot
For week of April 20, 2009

Adding Perennials to Your Landscape

Among all the seeds and bedding plants at your local garden centers are an array of plants called “Perennials”. Thinking back to elementary school, you remember the term “perennial” comes from the Latin *“per annus”*, which means *“Through the Years”*. In horticulture terms, it means ‘lasting’ or ‘returning’. Translated to plants, this means plants that return for more than two years. Perennials are a bit more expensive when you first purchase them. But from the fact that you can count on them for many years to reappear in the spring, they are really an investment in your landscape. Perennials’ tops are killed back by frost but roots and crown will survive most winters.

Here are some facts about perennials:

- Most perennials grow and flower season after season. Many thrive for a very long time, while others return for only a few years. Some perennials re-seed readily and may be moved around the garden.
- Unlike annuals, perennials have a definite period of bloom. Plants bloom in either the spring, summer, or fall. Perennials may bloom from 2 to 8 weeks or longer. One challenge is to use a variety of perennials so that color is available throughout the growing season.
- Although perennials do not require replanting every year. However, they do require watering, fertilizing, mulching, cutting back, weeding, dividing and sometimes transplanting.

Plant your perennials at the right time. If you are starting new perennials, that challenge is fairly simple because the perennials are sold and/or shipped at the correct planting time. For

instance, April & May is the best time to plant late summer and early fall perennials. Examples of these include the Canna Lily, many lilies, Lavender, Verbena, and Wormwood). Early spring-blooming perennials (like tulips and daffodils) should be planted in the fall.

Soil preparation is probably the single most important factor in growing perennials successfully. In addition to good drainage, provide abundant quantities of organic matters, a soil pH of 5.5 to 6.5, and fertilizer.

If plants are somewhat potbound at planting time, simply loosen the roots around the bottom and sides of the root ball and spread them out in the bottom of the planting hole. Cover and firm the soil lightly around the plant. Be sure the crown (the persistent base of the perennial) of the plant is at or slightly above ground level.

Two important secrets to growing perennials successfully are watering and controlling weeds. After planting, thoroughly water plants to settle soil around the roots.

Keeping a good-looking perennial bed should not be difficult. Use these four maintenance guidelines:

- ✓ Carefully water after planting and during the first season while the plant becomes established. Afterward, water to one inch per week during the growing season if water is not supplied by rainfall. Do not overwater!
- ✓ Keep a diligent watch for weeds, especially in the first few seasons. Maintaining a good mulch should control annual weeds.
- ✓ Cut the dead foliage of perennials to the ground faster the first hard freeze in the fall. DO NOT remove that foliage immediately after flowering!
- ✓ Divide most perennials periodically. Some require deadheading for continued bloom and others require staking.

For more information on perennials, stop by the Extension Office and request a copy of Publication ANR-0566, or go online to www.aces.edu and search publications for the title "Herbaceous Perennials in Alabama".

If you have questions on home gardening or related topics, remember that the Limestone County Master Gardeners have a 'HelpLine' on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays from 9 a.m. until 1 p.m. They are highly trained and willing to help with your home gardening and home grounds questions. Their phone number is 232-5510 and they are located in an office at the Limestone County Extension Office at 1109 W. Market Street in Athens.

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