

Perennial Plants 101

Definition:

A perennial is a herbaceous (soft stem vs. woody stem like on a shrub or tree) plant that lives for more than two years. The perennial plant dies back to ground level in the fall and goes dormant for the winter but the root is alive and the plant regrows in the spring. There are short-lived perennials (i.e., lupin) and long-lived perennials (i.e., peony). By contrast, an annual plant grows from seed, flowers, makes seed and then the parent plant dies within one growing season. A biennial plant does this over two years.

Growing conditions:

Each plant has specific growing conditions. They have adapted over millions of years to grow in their specific terrain. As the Victorian plant explorers searched the world for new and interesting plants, it became necessary to try to mimic the plant's native growing conditions. Plants brought back from tropical rain forests had to be grown in hot-houses with high humidity. Alpine plants grow on lean gravel like soil. Prairie plants like rich soil and full sun. Forest plants will scorch if planted in full sun. Knowing a plant's origins will help you identify its preferred growing conditions.

Plant hardiness is another consideration. Agriculture Canada has developed a plant hardiness map that indicates zones based on average low temperatures. A plant that survives in North Carolina (Zone 8) would not survive here (Zone 5a).

Plant labels will indicate exposure (sun or shade), type of soil, moisture requirements and hardiness. The label will indicate plant height, expected spread (width) and bloom time. Unlike annuals that bloom all summer, perennials have a set bloom period that can range from about a week to a month. The plant label may also give some hints about whether a plant is invasive or well-behaved. Descriptions like fast growing, aggressive and self-seeds readily, all mean that this plant will spread quickly and could be a problem.

Botanical vs. common name

Plants have a scientific or botanical name – usually based in Latin or Greek. The botanical name is made up of two parts – the genera and the specific epithet. These are used so there is no confusion about the plant's identification.

There are also common names for plants. Due to regional differences, miss-identification and colloquialisms, multiple plants sometimes have the same common name which can lead to confusion. The best example is the geranium. There is a perennial *Geranium* that looks nothing like the annual geranium (which is actually a *Pelargonium*) that is found in planters and hanging baskets.

So why is all this important? Well, if you are considering adding a Veronica to your garden, knowing that 'prostrata' means ground hugging or prostrate and that 'grandis' means large, you can determine which of the two species might fit in your space. Similarly, if your plant has 'maritima' (maritime) or 'alpina' (alpine) in the name, you've got a hint about its origins or native growing conditions.

Colours are also identified by the specific epithet. A few examples:

alba = white

rubra, sanguinea = red

azurea, caerulea = blue

viridis = green

Characteristics such as scent can be identified also:

fragrantissima = very fragrant

odorata = scented

foetida = fetid (stinky)

Country of origin is sometimes indicated by the species name:

canadense = Canada

japonica or nipponica = Japan

australis = Australia

Digging & Dividing Perennials

Some tips for success:

- Best done in early spring or fall
- Best done late in the day or on a cloudy/rainy day
- Plants should be well watered before digging
- Dig a big root ball
- Fleshy or fibrous rooted plants are easier to dig up than those with a tap root
- Divide clump with knife or shovel or two forks
- Get them back into the soil as quickly as possible (don't let them dry out)
- Tamp the soil around the plant to ensure good soil to root contact but don't compact the soil
- Water the transplant well until its roots re-establish

Planting from potted nursery stock

- Shake off as much of the nursery soil as possible
- Tease roots apart
- Dig a hole twice the size of the root ball
- Make a mound, spread the roots over that mound
- Back-fill to the same level as the plant was growing in the pot

Caring for Perennials

Make sure you have good healthy soil – that means add organic matter (manure, compost, shredded leaves, mulch, etc.) Soil that is rich in organic matter doesn't need chemical fertilizer. It should also be able to hold moisture and reduce the need for watering.

Once established (i.e, well-rooted), a perennial garden (in good soil and with correct plant selection) should not need watering (except in prolonged periods of drought).

Perennials may need dividing if they start to have reduced blooms or have a dead-zone in the centre of the clump.

Deadheading or removing the spent blooms keeps the plant looking tidy and can sometimes trigger the plant to bloom again. Deadheading is a good way to prevent the plant from self-seeding throughout the garden.