

PERENNIALS IN THE LANDSCAPE

Gary R. Doerr
Peppergrove Nursery
Lapeer, Michigan

INTRODUCTION

I would like to thank the Michigan Turfgrass Foundation, Michigan State University, and most importantly...you, for confirming my conviction, by your presence, that perennials are making their way into our landscapes and stirring your interest to learn more on how these persistent plants can enhance your grounds maintenance program and beautify the landscapes.

I always like to start my presentations on perennials with a definition. I am sure that by now we all recognize what perennials are, but to be sure I need you to write this down. Got your pen and paper? Perennials, as defined by a grounds superintendent: Perennials are plants, that had they lived, would bloom year-after-year. Or.....perennials are weeds with a press agent. You can see that this professional didn't think much of perennials. No respect. Certainly perennials are the underdogs of the plant world. Underdogs as they are, perennials are the perfect plant to fit my personality. I always root for the underdogs. You can probably guess my favorite baseball team. Down trodden as they are, the Cleveland Indians and perennials are making a strong comeback. Their rise can be attributed to better personnel development and a few significant trades. Breeding and selection have provided more players and better tools to meet the demands of today's landscapes. And, perennials have traded bareroot status, for containers that enable them to be moved and planted spring, summer, and fall. Perennials are ready for another big season, are you?

LANDSCAPE NICHE

"Plants for all seasons" - seasonal color and interest. Perennials are truly plants for all seasons. But be careful not to overplay their role in the landscape. Recognize them for what they are, fabulous tools that have been ignored in the recent past. Perennials combined with the foursome of annuals, woodies, evergreens, and turf are an awesome lineup for any landscape. Herbaceous perennials are essential to building breathtaking landscapes that transform in personality as spring becomes summer and summer, fall. And they do it with flair and perennial dependability.

Foliage and texture

Bloom is important, but foliage and texture characteristics will make or break any perennial planting. There is no plant in our great Midwest that blooms from thaw thru frost. Perennials are no exception, and therefore either are they boring. "Seasonality" is their strength. Foliage and texture can subtly or boldly punctuate the seasonal interest of any landscape. "Say it with foliage, tout it with texture".

Color, color, color

Perennials definitely walk the walk. They promise color and they deliver. Every color of the rainbow and more. Perennials can be used to support or follow the bold announcement of spring blooming trees and shrubs, complementing existing landscapes. And take center stage "en masse" or as star players on any links.

"Plants for all reasons" - they grow almost anywhere

If a single statement can be made about perennials as a group it can be done in a word, survivors. Perennial plants have evolved overtime adapting to variety of environmental conditions. Because the selection of perennials is so broad it is possible to find a plant for just about any growing condition.

Sunny and dry

Although not the most formidable of conditions, sunny and dry locations abound. Particularly in Michigan which has one of the lowest annual rainfall totals of any state east of the Mississippi. Varieties of sedums, ornamental grasses, and even daylilies shrug their shoulders at these conditions. Santolina, an herb, thrives.

Moist conditions

Moist or even downright wet conditions provide opportunity for many perennials. As you drive I-75 between Detroit and Toledo in August you'll see living proof of perennials flourishing, not drowning, in standing water. Species of hardy Hibiscus with dinner-plate size blossoms dot the fence lines visible even at 65+ miles per hour. *Lythrum salicaria*, troublesome as it is, dominates. Other species of *Lythrum*, which are sterile, are more appropriate selections for our Midwest plantings. Some perennials just like water. *Iris sibirica* requires it, *Ligularia 'The Rocket'* tolerates it, rather well I might add.

Shade, shade, shade

There are even some shady characters among this underdog group, perennials. Shady and dry? Try *Lamium galeobdolon 'Variegatum'*. This plant will thrive under a dense standing of pine or spruce, which is not only shady, but dry as well, because rain is unable to penetrate the thick canopy of evergreen. Shady and wet? How about *Houttuynia cordata 'Variegata'*. A strange little plant with tri-color foliage of green, cream, and pink that snugly hugs the ground. I know their mouthfuls, but if you learn them, you will love them. I guarantee their performance.

Everyone knows hostas and their shady reputation, but did you know astilbes have a dark side too? Blossoms range from white to red with the pink flowering *Astilbe pumila* being a personal favorite. The fern-like foliage is present throughout the growing season, adding to the appeal of this wonderful perennial staple. Perennial groundcovers like *Lamium* provide a beacon of light to even the darkest hollows. Pink flowers highlight the silvery foliage in spring with sporadic blossom throughout the summer if conditions are right. And, the small solomon's seal is a natural for the shady landscape.

Plants to Earn Your Fees On

Next to light requirements plant height and habit of growth are features that must be considered when selecting perennials. I have cultivated perennials that range in height from 2" groundcovers to the 12' ornamental grass, *Arundo donax*. Perennials earn their keep in problem solving and landscape use.

Groundcovers

Several years ago when I was invited to speak before this group I counted over forty species of perennials on Peppergrove's offering that could be used as groundcovers. *Pachysandra*, English Ivy, *Vinca*, and *Euonymus* were not among them. That fact, alone, speaks volumes on the under utilization of perennials in our landscapes. Professionals and home gardeners have pleaded for alternative groundcovers. Herbaceous perennials like the *Lamium* 'Beacon Silver' I mentioned earlier await their call to service.

Hostas, the most popular group of perennials in the Midwest, serve as excellent groundcovers when planted "en masse". They even bloom. Some varieties offer fragrant flowers, particular noticeable on calm summer mornings. And so you are not frightened by the uncertainty of growing perennials I have even included *Pachysandra*, an evergreen perennial, many of you have been growing for years. See, growing perennials is no problem.

Screens

Plant screens can gently divert the eye or abruptly seal the unwanted from sight. Perennials provide subtle diversions using foliage and texture to soften the sight lines. They can be used to effectively caress a wall to heighten interest or arranged in combinations to draw your eye, near and far. In recent years warm-season ornamental grasses, particular *Miscanthus* species, have gained popularity, in part, because they provide soft-textured screens with late summer, fall, and winter landscape interest.

Borders

Historically, perennial borders have been the mainstay in the English landscape. Period themes have influenced their design and incorporation in landscape plantings throughout time. Centuries ago herb borders were popular in formal settings. This planting of herbs is characteristic of many borders that identify a theme and carry it throughout the design. Another example is monochromatic borders that choose a color that repeats itself, everywhere. My favorite is the polychromatic theme border. This theme takes the "anything goes" approach to design, highlighting color, texture, and habit of growth. Combination plantings, like these, require time, tinkering, and patience before they capture your imagination.

Making Perennials Do Almost Anything For You

On my last visit here I challenged the audience to change. I asked them to open their minds and look closely at the world of perennials. Well, I am back and I can tell you from personal experience there has been a lot of change. Perennials are on the rise. Before I close today, I would be remiss if I failed to outline the process for continued success.

Planning - A Simple Approach

Principles of landscape design apply, even with perennials. Remember, planning is essential. However, let me remind you that making a mistake with a perennial is not like planting a 4" caliper Pin Oak in the wrong place. Perennials are easily moved if a mistake is made. Now, on the other hand, it's not like wearing a plaid shirt with stripe pants either. Pick up a few good reference books on design and plant materials, and try a few combinations on a small scale before planting that eighteenth fairway to a pasture of perennials.

Installation - "Well begun, Is Half Done"

Except for the extremely wet conditions where knowledgeable selection is the only key, proper bed preparation is advised. My advice; dig deep, add lots of organic matter (sphagnum moss peat and leaf mold are my favorites), provide good drainage and slightly raise the planting bed, soil test and amend if necessary, and lightly mulch with well-seasoned hardwood bark or shredded cedar.

Size of plant at installation time is an important consideration. Conventional wisdom says bigger is better. Not always so. Specimen material is appropriate when choosing a hosta or an ornamental grass because division is not imminent. However, other varieties may require division a year after installation if you start with too large of plant. My advice is to select container-grown material and when planting "en masse" use smaller containers (4.5" or one gallon).

Maintenance- - "Beware"

Low maintenance does not mean no maintenance. Avoid varieties that require staking, have inherent disease and insect problems, or that are short lived. Some varieties that are appropriate for the home landscape have no place in larger commercial plantings.

Deadheading (removing spent blossoms) will increase bloom and some repeat bloomers benefit from being cut back after bloom. Most other perennials can be cut back after bloom or after a hard freeze in the fall. Leave tops on ornamental grasses throughout the winter for landscape interest. Mulch around crowns after ground has frozen. The key to mulching is to keep the plant and ground cold to avoid frost heaving and dehydration.

Finally, I would like to express my appreciation to all of you, once again for taking the time to join me this afternoon. With the risk of stating the obvious I think from the few minutes that you spent with me today it is apparent that we have not covered even a fraction of the volumes of information there is to learn about my favorite underdog, perennials. I invite you to drop a business card in my Cleveland Indians baseball cap, that I will place up here on stage, if you are interested in receiving information on additional reference materials. And, if the sponsors of this symposium do not object I will be happy to include a copy of Peppergrove's Spring '94 Selection Guide. Thank you. Go Tribe. Go Turf. And, Go Perennials.