



Make the Move to Perennials

By Dr. Lois Berg Stack

Annual flowers can't be beat for stunning color, uniformity and mass impact for the whole season. But good things have a price, and with annuals the price is high maintenance. Planning the beds and ordering the plants is just the start—you still have to prepare the ground, plant the seedlings, mulch, water, fertilize, weed, control diseases and insects, deadhead and finally clean up at the end of the season. And that's not the end; it starts all over again every spring.

You can reduce the number of annuals you plant (and the amount of labor involved) without giving up the color, by replacing some of the annuals with perennials. Continue to use annuals in the front half or two-thirds of your borders, and replace the annuals in the back with tall perennials. Or continue to plant annuals in the back two-thirds of the borders, and plant low-growing perennials in the front to form a permanent edging. There are several advantages to this process of converting parts of annual gardens to perennials.

Planting labor is certainly reduced. Perennials need to be planted only once, after which most are quite permanent. True, they need to be divided periodically to stay in bounds, but none of the perennials discussed in this article require division more than once in three to five years. And perennials are best divided either in early spring, before the spring planting rush begins, or in late summer.

Maintenance labor is also reduced, since deadheading perennials is very different from deadheading annuals. Most perennials flower for a rather discrete period of several weeks, and very few flower for the entire season. This means that rather than deadheading all season to promote more flowering, you simply wait until the flowering period has ended, and remove all the dead flowers at once. Other maintenance tasks can also be avoided through proper selection of perennials. Do not use plants that need annual

winter mulch, staking, constant pruning or pinching, or other special labor.

Through proper selection of perennials, you can virtually eliminate pest problems from your flower gardens. The perennials discussed in this article have very few disease or insect problems. In fact, there is such a long list of pest-free perennials that you can plant a great variety without running the risk of introducing insect or disease problems.

Although most perennials do not flower for long periods, many have excellent foliage all season. The perennials discussed in this article certainly fall into this category. The leaves of tall perennials can form an attractive backdrop for annuals, and the foliage of edging perennials can really tie a flower garden together.

Perhaps the biggest advantage of incorporating perennials into your annual flower gardens is that they can extend the flowering season of the garden. Some perennials, like bulbs and spring-flowering phlox, flower very early in the season, before annuals begin to put on their show. Other perennials, like ornamental grasses and chrysanthemums, flower late in the season, extending the garden's color well into the fall.

When to Start

There's no time like the present! Most perennials can be planted any time in the season from early spring until late summer. Avoid planting during the heat of midsummer, when newly-planted perennials can dry out before they establish good root systems. Also avoid planting too late in the season, because perennials need time to establish good root systems to survive the winter.

The perennials discussed below can all be planted in late summer with excellent results. Why not reduce your maintenance labor now, by replacing some high-maintenance annuals with lower-maintenance perennials this August?

How to Start

Remember that perennials, unlike annuals, will stay in place for many years. It is absolutely essential to provide a location with well-drained soil and a good moisture supply. Good drainage is particularly important for survival during the winter. A wet soil will heave during alternate freezing and thawing in late winter, exposing and killing the surface roots of perennials. A well-drained soil, on the other hand, reduces the probability of frost heave damage.

Purchase high-quality plants from a reputable nursery or greenhouse. For a quick effect, purchase one-gallon landscape-size plants or field grown clumps rather than the four-inch size that has become popular with homeowners.

Wait until after the midsummer heat, then plant on a cool, cloudy day if possible. Water thoroughly after planting, and mulch well. When the foliage dies back after hard frost this fall, cut back the plants to just above ground level. This first winter, add a loose protective winter mulch like evergreen boughs or marsh hay to the newly planted perennials. After their first winter, the perennials discussed below should be reliably hardy without any winter mulch.

What to Start With

Artemisia schmidtiana 'Nana', commonly called "Silver Mound", is a popular and dependable perennial grown for its silvery foliage. Its common name is very appropriate, as it forms a silver mound of soft, feather-like foliage 15-18" tall and 18-24" broad. It is an attractive edging plant for any flower garden. This plant has no serious pests, and if grown in a somewhat poor soil it will stay compact throughout the season, and not have to be divided more than every three to five years. If grown in rich soil, it tends to become leggy, causing the mound to fall apart by the end of the season.

Several species of ornamental grasses are available, varying in size, texture, color and flowering time. Try the large-scale *Miscanthus* grasses. *Miscanthus sinensis*, "Eulalia Grass," is a 4-5' tall clump grass whose leaves arch gracefully. It flowers from September to October, extending the garden's season of interest into the fall. There are several variations of this species. *M.s.* 'Gracillimus,' called "Maiden Grass," has narrow gray-green leaves. *M.s.* 'Zebrina', or "Zebra Grass," has

narrow, horizontal yellow bands about 2-3" apart on the leaves. *M.s. 'Variegatus'* is the "Variegated Eulalia Grass." Its leaf blades are striped lengthwise with white.

Any of the Eulalia Grasses would be excellent for the background of a flower garden, spaced 3-4' apart. The clumps establish easily, but are not invasive. Another ornamental grass is *Festuca ovina glauca*, commonly called "Blue Fescue." It is a small clump grass that forms a perfect 10" mound of distinctive blue foliage. With individual clumps spaced 10-12" apart, Blue Fescue is an excellent perennial edging plant.

For good color, low maintenance and high-quality foliage all season, you can't beat the *Hemerocallis* hybrids, commonly called "Daylilies." These tough plants will gracefully withstand any exposure from full sun to medium shade (they'll even survive in full shade, although they won't flower there). Their sturdy roots provide excellent erosion control. Daylilies range in height from one to four feet when in flower, with their yellow, orange or reddish flowers held above mounds of arching, grasslike leaves. Daylilies flower in midsummer, and are best transplanted every five years after flowering, in August or early September. Try a row of daylilies in the back of an annual garden, with clumps of April-flowering daffodils planted in between the clumps of daylilies—the daffodils provide good color early in the season, and the daylily foliage hides the daffodils' leaves later in the season.

The durable *Hosta*, or "Plantain Lily," is used as a specimen, as an edging plant or as a very tough, low maintenance groundcover. It is valued more for its foliage than its flowers. Leaf color may be pale or dark green, bluish, yellowish or two-toned. Leaf shape ranges from very broad to narrow and twisted, and texture may be smooth, deeply veined or puckered. Plantain lily has blue, lavender or white flowers, often fragrant, in late summer. The flowers are held well above the mound of foliage, which reaches one to three feet in height, depending on species and cultivar.

A drift of taller Plantain Lilies spaced 24-30" apart along the back of a shady annual garden would provide a perfect backdrop for impatiens or wax begonias. They are also a good companion for shade-tolerant bulbs such as daffodils, since the Plantain Lily foliage hides the bulbs' foliage as it dies back later in the season. *Hosta* clumps

should be divided every five to eight years, depending on vigor and spread.

Heuchera sanguinea, or "Coral Bells," is a beautiful perennial best used as an edging plant. Its scalloped leaves form a perfect mound 12-15" in height, and retain their excellent quality all season. The tiny bell-shaped pink, red or white flowers are held high above the foliage in airy clusters, lasting from June into August. Coral Bells prefer exposure from full sun to partial shade. Plant them 18" apart, and divide clumps every three to five years.

Iris germanica, the "German Iris," is an elegant June-flowering perennial. The unique flowers are available in blue, purple, white, yellow and bronze, and in all the subtle variations of those colors. Plants range in height from 10-36" and are among the showiest of all perennial flowers. The sword-shaped leaves are good quality for nearly the whole season. German Irises should be planted in August or early September. It is essential to plant the thick rhizomes at ground level (not deeper!) to minimize attack by the iris borer, an insect that penetrates the fleshy rhizomes. These penetration tunnels create an infection court for iris rot, which can kill the plants. German Iris should be divided every 3-5 years, in early fall.

A row of German Iris would be a good backdrop for any annual flower garden. Or, you might plant a few clumps of iris in the background, with each clump formed by three iris rhizomes planted 2' apart in a triangle. Plant a single specimen of *Gypsophila paniculata*, "Perennial Baby's Breath," in the middle of each triangle of iris. The iris will flower in June, while the Baby's Breath is small. The Baby's Breath will bloom from July to September, forming an airy 3' mound of tiny white flowers. With this technique, you can get two seasons of flowers from one space in the garden.

Iris sibirica, the "Siberian Iris," is available primarily in purple, blue and white, and ranges in height from 18-36". It flowers at about the same time as German Iris, but is perhaps not quite as spectacular. Siberian Iris has three advantages over the German Iris, however. It requires division less frequently, it is not attacked by the iris borer, and its narrow, arching leaves are of excellent quality the entire season. The slender rhizomes should be planted 1½" deep and two feet apart, in spring or early fall.

Paeonia lactiflora, the "Common

Peony," is a traditional June-flowering favorite. Colors include pink, red and white, with many bicolors. The Common Peony has three basic flower types: singles, doubles and Japanese hybrids. The doubles have the showiest flowers, but they are the least appropriate for a golf course, since the large, heavy flowers must be staked to keep them from toppling over during rain storms. The singles and Japanese hybrids are quite spectacular, and require less maintenance. The three-foot plants are shrub-like and have beautiful foliage all season, forming a good backdrop for annuals. Plant peonies in August or early September in a deep, rich soil with pink buds ("eyes") about 1½" deep. Peonies will not flower for two or three years, but they are permanent, and never need transplanting.

Sedum spectabile, the "Showy Stonecrop," is an 18-24" succulent perennial. It is available in various shades of red and pink, and produces 4-6" flat-topped clusters of star-shaped flowers from August to frost. Showy Stonecrop has excellent quality from early spring until frost. In fact, some landscapers leave the old flowers on the plants through the winter, for textural interest. Set plants 24-30" apart along the back of an annual flower border.

Stachys byzantina, "Lamb's Ears," is valued more for its foliage than its flowers. The 4" long leaves are densely
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covered with soft, woolly white hairs, forming a mat 8-12" tall. Plant Lamb's Ears along the front of an annual flower garden, 15-18" apart. It will fill in as a broad edging plant. Most Lamb's Ears

produce 12-15" upright stalks in July, with small magenta flowers, but gardeners often cut them back before the flowers develop. Lower-growing, non-flowering types such as 'Silver Carpet' are available.

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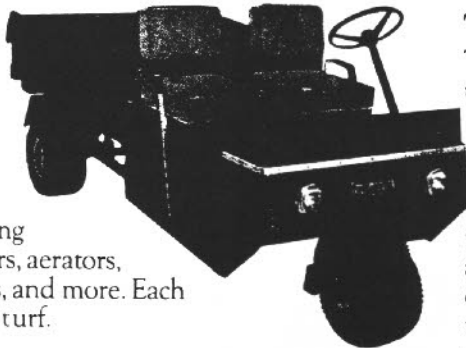
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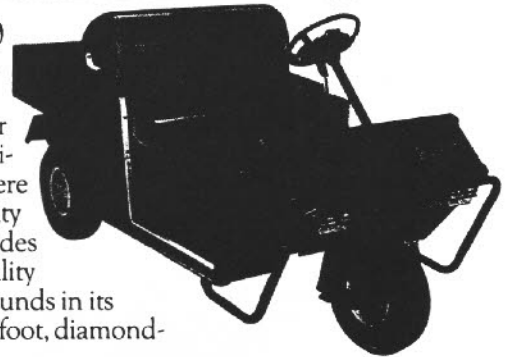
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