

USING

PERENNIALS FOR 'CUSTOM' JOBS

Commercial accounts are discovering what homeowners already know: perennials make landscapes distinctive.

■ Tom Coffman doesn't want to work on weekends. He gets enough of that Monday through Friday.

That's why the bachelor construction engineer hired Barnes Nursery to install a low-maintenance landscape at his weekend home. Barnes succeeded admirably. Tom spends precious little time caring for the green, cool landscape surrounding his neat, one-story ranch.

Barnes did this by planting groundcovers, dwarf woody ornamentals and herbaceous perennials. The Huron, Ohio, firm installed plant varieties that require little care. (Few, if any, landscape plants require absolutely no care. A Barnes' crew freshens up this landscape several times each season.)

It's not what this landscape contains that makes it unique, though.

It's what's it's missing—annuals; it contains just a cluster of geraniums for a splash of red at the home's front door. The rest of the landscape, now several years old, survives from season to season, some of it remaining green through the winter, some of it dying back and leaving delicate brown or gray leaves or stalks.

The homeowner's lifestyle and maintenance considerations dictated use of perennial plants in this garden. There is, however, no reason why perennial and annual plants can't be used together. More typically they are. Even an established perennial grower like Sam Jones of Piccadilly Farm in Bishop, Ga., acknowledges that "for color, it's hard to beat annuals."

Commercial still lagging—Because

homeowners want distinctive, one-of-a-kind landscapes, they're more likely to welcome herbaceous perennials into their landscapes than commercial clients, says Jim MacMahon, maintenance manager for Coronis Landscaping in Nashua, N.H.

But selling commercial accounts on perennials can be tougher.

"Often there are no gray areas with commercial accounts," says MacMahon. "To them, plants are either shrubs, trees or flowers. When they think of flowers, they think of annuals."

Landscape companies—even those specializing in commercial installations and maintenance—would, however, be unwise to ignore perennials and focus exclusively on flowering annuals and woody ornamentals.

"More landscapers in the Atlanta area are putting in nice gardens, using higher quality plants, because Post Properties is stimulating a lot of interest in perennials," says Picadilly Farms' Jones.

In this case, a larger, upper-end landscape firm is influencing an entire market area, commercial and residential. More typically, the impetus for professionally-installed perennial gardens comes from landscape designers who concentrate just on home gardens.

"Out here, a lot of relatively small-in-volume landscape designers like to use a lot of perennials," says Al Rogers of Caprice Farm Nursery in Sherwood, Ore. "They seem to be using proportionally many more perennials than the big companies that are landscaping the business campuses

and the other big projects."

Plant vs. business people—Rogers characterizes some of these professionals as plant people first, and business people second. "They do one or two residential gardens at a time and they do a very good job at it," he says.

One reason why bigger landscape firms often do not embrace perennials more enthusiastically is because they've become so comfortable delivering what they've always delivered, including seasonal color changeovers: annuals to mums to pansies, etc. Perennials, by contrast, live from year to year, although certainly not indefinitely. Most die back each fall, particularly in northern climates, to blossom again the following season.

But lack of familiarity with herbaceous perennials might be just as limiting.

"It's amazing. We still see landscapers who have been in business for 20 years and they ask us, 'I've never planted these flowers. Will you help me?' Of course, we'll help," says Mark Mackovajak, owner of North Coast Perennials in Madison, Ohio. His wholesale nursery has as many as 300,000 container plants.

A well-designed landscape using perennial plants can be just as colorful as an annual garden.



Mackovajak feels that some landscapers may be intimidated by the amazing variety of perennials. That's one reason why North Coast planted its own display garden with about 100 different types of plants.

"But, let's face it, perennials are something landscapers don't necessarily have to learn about, and they can still get by," says Mackovajak.

Show them—Bobbie Schwartz of Bobbie's Green Thumb in Cleveland, is a self-admitted plant person. She thinks she's a pretty fair business person too, even if the volume of her business is controllably small.

She credits much of her growing popularity as a landscape designer to her love and knowledge of perennial flowers. Like Mackovajak, she often has to show prospective clients actual growing plants before she can begin selling. She doesn't go far. She uses the property surrounding her fashionable home as a demonstration garden. Each perennial plant is labeled for easy identification.

Schwartz says the public—and even some landscape professionals—often mistakenly believe that perennials are *always*:

- less colorful than annuals,
- easier to maintain than annuals, and
- more expensive than annuals.

"A number of perennials will give you as



Designer Bobbie Schwartz says the amazing variety of perennials give her a never-ending supply of landscape options.

much color as annuals. They will start to bloom in June and bloom until frost," she says. Many don't, of course, but that barely lessens their value as landscape plants. "Because of the color and texture of their foliage, or because of their shape, some are almost as interesting when they're not blooming," claims Schwartz.

Some perennials require less maintenance and some don't, says Schwartz. Once established, some require only to be cut back each spring. Others require regular dead-heading (removal of exhausted blossoms)

and pruning.

Schwartz also maintains that, yes, perennials are more expensive to purchase than annuals, but cost less to install and maintain in the long run.

Commercial applications—

Schwartz says perennials at commercial sites will grow as landscapers learn to use them to solve difficult landscape problems in addition to accepting them for their beauty and form.

For example, she claims the management of a Cleveland chemical plant is extremely pleased with the low-maintenance landscape she installed at the office entrance. She used mostly perennials, ornamental grasses and low-growing shrubs.

"I decided on plants that will fill out and leave as little exposed ground as possible. I designed this landscape to solve problems, not to create problems for the future," says Schwartz.

That's the same philosophy MacMahon said his Coronis Landscaping used in planting daylilies in the parking island of a valued client. "When a snow plow runs over them in December, they don't even know they got hit. In the spring they're back up again," says MacMahon.

—Ron Hall

Selected flowering perennials

Name	Height	Bloom period	Colors
Astilbe, <i>false spirea</i>	18-36"	mid- through late summer	white, pink, lilac, or red feathery plumes
Aster	3-4'	August-September	white, pink/lavender, raspberry red, blue
Bellflower	1-3'	late spring to summer	white, blue
Chrysanthemum	12-48"	late summer to fall	all colors but blue; pinch off flower buds to delay bloom till fall
Shasta daisy	24-36"	midsummer-late fall	white daisy, yellow center
Delphinium	24-48"	mid- to late summer	blue, white, purple spikes
Pinks	8-18"	early through late summer	white and red carnation-like flowers
Garden mums	12-24"	September, October	white yellow, pink/lavender, bronze, red, orange coral, salmon
Miniature roses	12-18"	spring through fall	white, yellow, pink/lavender, orange, red
Gypsophila	2-3'	late Aug. to late Sept.	white, pink