

# PROSPER WITH **perennials**

**Even clients who want low-maintenance plantings can benefit from a perennial service plan.**

BY JAMIE J. GOOCH

**P**ERENNIALS HAVE long been the middle child of lawncare. Stuck between attention-hungry turf and the boastful blooms of annuals, perennials have dutifully emerged, year after year. That low-maintenance dependability is a trait that many homeowners seek in a landscape, and because breeders have been busy adding showiness, perennials are becoming more and more popular. Landscape contractors can offer perennial services that will help make the plants attractive from a business perspective as well as an aesthetic one.

"It's a really nice niche to pursue," says Ellen Vincent, an environmental landscape specialist in Clemson University's Horticulture Department. "Annuals are easy. They're kind of no brainers. It's the plant connoisseur who will learn about perennials."

She says landscape contractors who take the time to educate themselves about the perennials in their region will find that the two- to four-week bloom time of perennials of yore has been extended to an entire season in some new varieties. They'll also learn that low-maintenance doesn't mean no maintenance. Many homeowners will be willing to pay for perennial expertise, from installation through to a recurring maintenance schedule.



In warm regions, cyclamen persicum, like this Snowridge Mini Wine from Syngenta Flowers, can be planted as a perennial.

## Perennial planting prep

Ensuring the soil is ready to support plant life is the most important step to installing any bed, and perennials are no exception. Landscape contractors can provide soil testing services, as well as expertise on which plants should be placed where, depending on their soil, sun and water requirements, and their shape, height, color and texture.

"We used to try to change the soil situation to fit our needs, but that's not sustainable," Vincent says. "Now we've learned to work with the site as is, and only change it if absolutely necessary."

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**Above:** Lantana display a wide variety of growing habits. Bandana Lemon Squeeze, shown here, is one of 28 colors in Syngenta's Kwik Kombos series. **Right:** Angelonia, like this Serenita Mixture from PanAmerican Seed, is known for its upright habit.

One type of soil that may necessitate change is compacted ground. Without oxygen, soil can't hold moisture. If a bed must be planted in compacted ground, the soil should be remediated first and whatever activities caused the compaction need to be avoided.

"Making sure soil does not become compacted in the first place is the No. 1 duty of landscape professionals," says Vincent. Using equipment or even foot traffic on saturated soils can cause compaction.

Beyond soil preparation concerns, landscape contractors should help ensure their clients will receive season-long interest from their perennial plantings — both from blooms and foliage.

"Perennial connoisseurs are all about foliage," says Vincent. "Foliage needs to be talked about as much as bloom. Blooms may not last the whole season, so attractive foliage is a selling point."

### Installation know-how

Once the soil is ready and the right perennials have been chosen for the space, putting them in the ground is just one step of the installation process. Ensuring plants get established is another service landscapers can offer with perennials.

"Making sure that installed plants receive moisture until the roots are established is critical," Vincent says. "Even with plants that are drought tolerant, they still need watered until they're established. That could be three weeks or three months, depending on the part of country you're in."

Mulching helps to retain moisture and may need to be applied more than once per season, depending on the region. That's another opportunity for landscapers to connect with clients. Mulch may also help alleviate the need for fertilization.

Weeding is perhaps the most labor intensive maintenance involved with perennials. Landscapers can offer herbicide treatments, and some clients might be interested in contracting for hand weeding services.

Once perennials are installed and established, landscapers still have an opportunity to provide a service to their clients. By definition, a plant only needs a lifecycle of three years to classify as a perennial. Perennials do need to be replaced. Even

longer-lived varieties should be separated every three years.

"Maintenance firms can use that to their advantage," Vincent says. "You can tell the client, 'In three years, we'll come back and divide the plants for you.' That's long-term, repeat business."

Capitalizing on perennials requires knowing how various plants perform in your region and soil conditions, then communicating their benefits to clients. Becoming a perennial expert takes time, but local botanical gardens, commercial growers and websites such as the Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center's ([wildflower.org](http://wildflower.org)) can help.

"If you put together all the info about the area, customers, soils and plants, that enables you to really know your environment," Vincent says. "All that info gets synthesized, and if you think of the ecosystem while you're doing business, then you'll make good decisions." ■■■

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### EMERALD COAST GROWERS VARIETY FOCUS: FLOWERING GRASSES

Emerald Coast Growers' flowering grasses program is a great companion program for potted annuals. The program launched with six selections in a range of colors, textures and sizes: *Briza maxima*, *Eragrostis tef* Ruby Silk, *Lagurus ovatus*, *Panicum elegans* Frosted Explosion, *Pennisetum villosum* and *Melinis nerviglumis* Savannah. These annuals offer possibilities for mixed containers, patio pots and window boxes. For more information visit [www.ecgrowers.com](http://www.ecgrowers.com).

PHOTOS COURTESY: SYNGENTA FLOWERS (LEFT); PANAMERICAN SEED





### Scent of spring

**Monrovia's** new Golden Crane Hydrangea (*Hydrangea angustipetala* 'MonLongShou Golden Crane') features large lacecaps of white and chartreuse. It not only presents its flowers in late spring, the earliest of all hydrangeas to blossom, but is highly scented, according to the company. Hardy in USDA Zones 6-10, this selection was made from seed collected in Southern Sichuan Province, China. It prefers rich, porous soil. Pink flowers will be maintained in neutral or alkaline soil with pH of 7.0 or higher, while blue flowers will be maintained in acidic soil with pH range of 5.5 or below. [Monrovia.com](http://Monrovia.com)

### Year-rounder

**Ball's** 'Jealousy' *Leycesteria* offers all-season interest, with chartreuse foliage and a big, bushy shape. Some blooms may appear in July, and cooler conditions express maroon highlights to the foliage. Purple fruit appears in the fall. It pairs well with other vigorous plants in large-size containers, and performs well in wetlands. [BallHort.com](http://BallHort.com)



### Gentle giants

The 'Red Fox XXL' series is comprised of large-flowered dahlias, boasting almost 6-in. diameter blooms. These large flowers grow on a plant that doesn't get out of control — nor will they need staking or extra care to maintain the plant structure, according to **Dummen USA**. The full-sun-loving annuals grow to heights between 10 and 24 in. The seven bloom color options include Veracruz (pictured), pink and white; Chiapas, intense pink; Rojo Paramo, red purple; Mayo, white; Durango, yellow; Hidalgo, copper; and Paraiso, pink. [DummenUSA.com](http://DummenUSA.com)



### Here come hummingbirds

The warm tones of the Agastache hybrid 'Summer Sunset' can brighten your summer borders and containers. The newest addition to **Terra Nova Nurseries'** Summer Series, this hummingbird mint is drought-tolerant, has an upright, compact habit, and blooms all summer, according to the company. Hardy to USDA Zone 6, it ranges from 10 to 24 in. in height and features 1.5-in. blooms.

[TerraNovaNurseries.com](http://TerraNovaNurseries.com)



### Pastel palette

*Rosa* 'Carding Mill' (Auswest) from **David Austin Roses** is a repeat-flowering shrub that grows to about 4x3.5 ft., thriving in areas of full sun or partial shade (USDA Zones 5-9). Featuring a myrrh fragrance, cupped blooms appear with approximately 80 petals in mixed shades of pink, apricot and yellow. This rose was named after a valley in the Long Mynd, a scenic area of hills and moors close to David Austin's display gardens in Shropshire, England. [DavidAustinRoses.com](http://DavidAustinRoses.com)