

Care of herbaceous perennials

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Herbaceous perennials are tremendously important in virtually every garden.

While shrubs and trees provide a permanent woody structure, and bulbs have their moment of glory, herbaceous perennials are with us from spring, when their young shoots re-emerge from winter dormancy, right through to the frosts of autumn and beyond.

Planting

Choosing plants that relish the conditions in your garden is the first step, but investing some care and attention at planting time, and while your plants are establishing themselves, will be handsomely rewarded by better performance all round for many years to come.

- ❖ Make sure the soil has been well prepared and all perennial weeds in the border have been removed.
- ❖ Choose healthy, vigorous-looking plants, bought in spring or autumn.
- ❖ Ensure the soil in the planting hole is loose enough to allow the roots to grow out.
- ❖ Soak roots in water before planting.
- ❖ Gently tease roots away from the rootball so they will grow out.
- ❖ Plant with a trowel, and firm by hand.
- ❖ Water thoroughly.

- ❖ Plant herbaceous perennials in groups of three or five for best effect.

Routine maintenance

Maintenance is minimal if plants have been selected to suit the conditions but, even so, care taken in carrying out some simple tasks will be repaid by better performance and a more attractive display.

- ❖ Spring is the best time to apply a mulch which will help prevent weed seeds germinating and will also lessen the need for watering in the summer. Mulches include bark chippings, cocoa shells, plastic membranes, grass clippings or even pebbles.
 - ❖ Some perennials (asters and delphiniums, for example) need staking, and supports should be put in place in spring - they will soon be masked by foliage if you want them to be hidden. Staking can be rustic to blend in, or elaborate, becoming part of the design. Painted stakes can give early colour to the border, or you could try interesting cane toppers in the form of butterflies or fancy finials to give another decorative dimension?
 - ❖ Single staking - delphiniums and similar plants look best with one stake per stem, tied individually as it grows.
- ❖ Group staking - asters and other similar plants will need a group of stakes or a wire ring to grow up through, supporting the many flower spikes on display.
 - ❖ Young spring growth is vulnerable to slugs and snails, some more than others, but it is best to take action as soon as you can. There are many options for slug and snail control; see our factsheet (GWF265) on these pests for more information. Keep weeds in check as they are not only unsightly but also compete for space, light, food and water. As the border fills out with plants, weeds should become less of a problem.
 - ❖ Keep young plants well watered.
 - ❖ Established plants may need watering in dry periods.
 - ❖ Deadheading keeps plants tidy, can lead to a second flowering, and encourages leafy growth that will flower well next year.
 - ❖ In autumn, cut back dead and dying top growth (unless you require them for winter effect. For example, the flowerheads of sedum or the golden flowerheads and foliage of grasses). In cold areas cutting back can be left until spring as it provides some protection against the cold.

Dividing and propagating

After a few years you will find that your perennials have grown into large clumps. You may also find that some of them do not flower as prolifically as in their younger days and may start to die out in the centre. The solution is to divide these congested clumps. The benefits are substantial:

- ❖ Better flowers will be produced on a rejuvenated plant.
- ❖ Resistance to pest and disease attack increases as the plant becomes more vigorous.
- ❖ More invasive perennials will be curbed - preventing them from suffocating their neighbours.

❖ You will have a greater number of plants which can either be planted elsewhere in the garden or given away to friends or family.

The principles of division are basically the same for all perennials. Divide perennials during their dormant season, between late autumn and early spring, but only when the weather is suitable - neither too cold nor too wet. Dig up the clump to be divided and put it on a bench, or other hard surface. Divide the rootstock up by teasing the clump into separate pieces by hand or failing that, use two garden forks back to back or a sharp knife if the roots are tough and woody. Discard the old central root

section - it is the youngest, outermost roots that are the most vigorous. Each section should have at least three buds; smaller sections should be grown on elsewhere before going into the border. Make sure too that each piece has more roots than top growth. This helps re-establishment.

Perennials can also be propagated from cuttings in spring or by collecting seed, though seedlings may not be the same as their parents.

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