

In the Garden Nursery

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Consultations available

At Play with Perennials: Don't be Afraid to Experiment with Color, Form, and Texture

By Lorri Abel

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Perennials fascinate and perplex many gardeners, but developing perennials beds is fun and a wonderful way to express yourself. As owner of a nursery I frequently give advice to those needing help or inspiration. Perennial gardening is rewarding journey; learning is nonstop, and new plant choices arrive annually. Though the educational process is ongoing, it is exciting to develop perennials beds that, once established, reflect your personality. Improve your soil, find harmonious plant grouping, water especially well the first year and your perennials beds will be a joy.

I do recommend reading and learning. The public library is a great source of books on design, perennials and other gardening interests. Learn through books, periodicals, other gardens, other gardeners, and develop your own style, one that reflects Alaska conditions and your own preferences.

CONSIDER YOUR SPACE

To begin the process thoughtfully, inventory your space. Consider where you would most enjoy a new garden, perhaps by a deck or visible from a window. A garden in an area visible to pedestrians is a gift to the neighborhood.

New perennial garden beds should be located for maximum enjoyment. Resist the desire to add perennials under large trees unless you have no other choices. Tree roots intensely compete for existing food and water and are always a very difficult spot.

After deciding upon the site, consider all the environmental factors at play: sun or shade, wind patterns, human and animal traffic, and soil conditions. Use this information to guide plant selection.

Give some thought to the size and shape of the beds. Narrow beds are difficult to make visually interesting and are quickly filled. Make sure you can reach all of the bed from one side or the other without stepping into it. In a wide bed, this usually means installing stepping stones or a path of some type. Stepping into a bed quickly destroys the condition of the soil, making it hard, more impervious to water and root growth.

Try different shapes, laying out a design with a hose or electrical cord until you find one pleasing to your eye, time, and budget. Remember, it really is OK to reduce the size of your lawn!

GO UP, NOT DOWN

Consider building up and creating a raised bed rather than digging down. For years, garden beds were placed on grade, requiring digging and removing soil. Now we recommend building the soil up above grade. It is far easier to install a raised bed, and over time, drainage improves and the soil warms faster in the spring.

Use quality topsoil, ideally a foot or more, and amend generously with organics such as steer manure or compost. I also like to add a balanced organic fertilizer, initially working both the organic material and fertilizer into the new soil. To continually improve your soil, add a fresh layer of fertilizer and compost or manure on top of the existing soil in the spring while the plants are emerging.

Once plants are in and established, it is not necessary to work amendments into the soil. Place organics around the plants, not on stalks or stems, and let the earthworms and other organisms in your soil take charge.

After the hard work is done, you are ready to choose perennials. As a nursery owner, I see many styles of plant shopping. Buyers run the gamut from careful planners with prepared lists to impulsive 'one of everything' types. There is no right or wrong way to buy. Unlike a tree, perennials can be moved, added or deleted. Perennial beds are never finished, always a work in progress.

Alaskans starved for color early in the season tend to buy lush plants in full bloom. Try to choose plants for a long season of bloom, and don't forget to pick some later blooming plants. They may not be as appealing in May, but by August they will prove their worth.

Plants blooming in August, such as *Ligularia*, *Monarda* (bee balm), *Astrantia* (Masterwort), and *Thalictrum* (Meadow Rue) are a delight as the season starts to wane. Try to extend the season as much as possible both with early bloomers and those that provide color right up until frost.

PICK COMPATIBLE PLANTS

Make bulbs a part of your perennial garden. Planted in September, bulbs such as Daffodils and Squill will be the first color in your garden in April and May. Emerging perennial foliage will hide the leaves as they decline.

Tulips, much to my dismay, are a favorite moose food. Daffodils, species Tulips, and other small flowering bulbs don't attract moose.

Choose plants based on your conditions. In Alaska, many traditions shade plants can tolerate some sun, and many sun-loving plants will thrive with less than full sun due to our long summer days.

Most important, choose plants that love to live together. Hosta, though tolerant of some sun in our climate, would not thrive in conditions that drought-tolerant sun plants such as Achillea (Yarrow) or Nepeta (catmint) adapt to. This type of information may be difficult to glean from plant tags, so observe other gardens, ask questions and be willing to experiment to find good plant combinations.

As Ann Lovejoy, author of "Organic Garden Design School," state "Choose cooperator plants that share resources well and grow readily without becoming thugs." You can maximize your time enjoying your garden by working with nature, finding plants that live together harmoniously and have similar environmental needs.

When planning and shopping, be aware of how individual plants spread. Clump-forming plants will get larger each year, but their size is manageable. Plants that spread underground, while useful too fill a large space, usually become invasive and do not co-exist well with other plants. Finding out how a plant spreads before you purchase it can prevent disappointment and extra work in the future. A popular ground-cover choice, Aegopodium (Bishop's Weed), is an example of a plant that will quickly take over a perennial bed.

DON'T FORGET THE UPKEEP

Be aware of the maintenance needs of a plant. Is staking required? Is it prone to slug damage? Can it tolerate wind if your area is prone to summer winds? It's hard to find a more showy plant than a Delphinium in bloom, but they require rigorous staking and are prone to bud worms in the spring. Choose the plants you enjoy, but be aware of their special needs.

Pick perennials with different foliage types. Foliage is an important part of perennials design. Contrasting foliage and texture are at least as interesting as flower color and type in perennial beds.

Consider using the steely-blue foliage of Blue Oat Grass, the subtle maroon coloration of Geranium 'Samobor' or the chartreuse foliage of Hosta 'Gold Standard'. Color

preference is a very individual choice. Choose colors and combinations that you find appealing. Don't be afraid to experiment with color, form, and texture.

Perennial gardens should be a delight, not overly time consuming. Pick your garden site carefully, put most of your time into building good soil, and find plants that like similar conditions, know the maintenance requirements of the plants you chose, and you are well your way to creating a beautiful garden that is an expression of yourself.

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