

Perennial Plant Care

This sheet has been composed to help gardeners learn how to maintain perennial flowers, ornamental grasses, flowering bulbs and evergreen groundcover.

Utmost in importance the first year following the installation of these plants/bulbs is watering the plants. It is very common for these plants during the first year in your garden to “hang on for dear life” because they are struggling to acclimate to a new surrounding different from the perennial and bulb farms. Regular watering by the homeowner/gardener is mandatory. The best methodology, in general, is water thoroughly (soak) and then allow the soil to dry out and then water again. The time in between waterings depends on the weather, location of the plant in the garden and the type of soil in the garden.

Regular fertilization is recommended for all plant material. Read instructions for each fertilizer because over fertilizing can kill the plant.

PERENNIAL FLOWERS

Most perennial flowers installed in gardens by Chris' Landscape, Inc. were grown in 1 or 2-gallon containers. As noted earlier, watering is important. Also, 2-3” of fine mulch around the plants is important to keep away weeds and maintain moisture in the garden. As the garden matures and the plants grow together to shrink the spacing in between plants the need for mulch lessens and eventually is eliminated.

Some perennial flowers are great for cutting. That is: cut the flower stems out of the garden and place them in a vase or dry them. Some perennial foliage looks great all year long and these plants you would not want to cut back to the ground in the fall (ie. sedum, ligularia and astilbe). Just leave them to offer some winter interest. Some perennial plants can be left uncut to self-sow within the garden with their seeds (ie. echinacea, rudbeckia, larkspur). The plants you want to cut down you should cut them with hedge trimmers, pruners or sharp scissors to within 2” of the soil. It is also beneficial to place ground up leaves in the garden to protect the plants from the winter weather. In the spring you can cultivate the leaves into the garden or just rake them out and wait for another great colorful gardening season to begin.

My schedule for perennial plants and ornamental grasses is: the first year keep them alive; the second year help them thrive by weeding and fertilizer; the third or fourth year they will be ready to split up and replant in a different area of your garden, sell, trade or give away.

ORNAMENTAL GRASSES

Most ornamental grasses are native to our area (Illinois, USDA Zone 5). Grasses come in all shapes, sizes and colors. Most grasses grow best in full sun, but there are species of grasses that do well in the part and full shade. Most grasses are slow starters in the garden. They do not get started growing very much until May or June so they are best surrounded by early growing and blooming plants so there is not a hole in the garden until summer. Grasses flower in late summer/early fall. This is their time to shine. Most perennials can hold their shape, whether it may be a short round one, dwarf fountain grass or a tall 8' high and 3' wide plant. It is great to have this late season structure in your garden. If the plant does not break or fall over leave it alone for the winter. It may be nice to look at when it is cold and snowy. The best time to cut back the grasses with hedge shears, pruners or sharp scissors to 2-6" tall depending on the type of grass and the size of the plant is late winter/early spring (March). At this time in your garden your spring flowering bulbs may start emerging from the soil.

FLOWERING BULBS

Flowering bulbs are a great addition to your garden. We recommend using bulbs in your garden when you need some flower color at a time of the year when you could lengthen the color season (February, March, August, September). We like to use spring flowering bulbs such as crocus, scilla, hyacinth, daffodils and other naturalizing bulbs. Some summer flowering bulbs we use are oriental lilies and dahlias because they add so much color from so many types of flower plants. Once the flower is gone it is important to only cut back the flower and flower stem and leave the leaves until they turn brown or yellow and die. The reason is to allow the leaves to photosynthesize energy into the bulbs for the following year. It is good to plant bulbs amidst other plants so you do not have to look at the dying leaves in an open area of the garden.

EVERGREEN GROUNDCOVER

We plant evergreen groundcover as a low plant that can be grown in partial shade and shade areas of the garden. It is common to replace a thin lawn with groundcover. Groundcover is a low-maintenance plant. It can be used in a garden with many other types of perennials. Control the growth, allow to fill in and you will enjoy many types of species (ie. vinca minor, pachysandra, heder helix, euonymus, ajuga). I found the best distance to install 3" plant plugs is 8" apart. If maintained properly the plants should fill in within 3 years.