

Blue Mountain Nurseries

Growing Perennials

Perennials survive through the winter and grow back every year and survive more than two years in the garden. Annuals are plants that must be replanted every year. Most perennials will not flower until they are mature or well established, which can take a year or so after they are planted. Most perennials are low-maintenance and easy to grow.

Planting a perennial garden is like painting a picture that is constantly changing. When choosing perennials, think about colour, height, shape, flowering times and texture. Some perennials are worth planting for their foliage alone, other's offer stunning colour or interesting seed heads. Spring and early summer may be the showcase season for perennials, but consider how the garden will evolve over the seasons and make space for perennials that flower in late summer.

Many consider perennials in the context of the traditional, English cottage garden, but mixed planting with New Zealand native perennials offers interesting texture, shape, and colour as well as some with beautiful flowers. Including them in planting schemes means flower gardens won't look bare in winter. Evergreens planted among flowering perennials make an attractive contribution to the evolving garden space.

Soil preparation and planting

Autumn and spring are the best time to plant perennials.

It all comes down to the soil! Get this wrong, and your plants will struggle to thrive. With a little effort, you can change some of these conditions if they are not right. Look at the soil in your planting site in more detail. Sandy soil is free draining, but it often lacks nutrients so you may need to dig in some well-rotted compost to increase the organic matter content. Clay soil is prone to waterlogging and has nutrients but they are bound up, so you may need to add organic matter to help with aeration. If your soil is crumbly and very light in colour, again, well-rotted compost dug through will help. Moist, dark coloured soil that is loose and drains well (with earth worms) is ideal. These steps preparing to plant, will help improve soil structure, aeration, drainage and fertility.

Before planting your perennial, make sure that the plant is well watered. Do this by watering the plant several times while in its bag or pot. You can do this whilst you prepare the planting hole.

Depending on the condition of the soil in the planting site, dig in any well-rotted compost and/or potting mix that you might be using. The hole needs to be large enough to accommodate all the roots and any soil that is attached to them. Digging a planting hole that's slightly deeper than the pot the plant is in and 2 times the width of the pot will be ideal.

Remove the plant from its bag or pot. If the roots are curling around the root ball or it is 'root bound' take a craft knife or use a spade, and carefully cut the roots down the sides of the root ball in 4-6 places (depending on the size of the root ball) to encourage new roots to grow.

If a mat of roots exists on the bottom of the root ball, cut this off to prevent root curling and girdling and this will also help with the regeneration of new roots in the surrounding soil.

If the plant is not root bound, gently tease out the roots.

Place the root ball in the hole. Aim to position the plant in the hole so that it is at the same depth as it was in the pot. Avoid burying the crown, the spot where roots and stems meet as this can encourage disease.

If you are doing so, mix organic matter like compost into the soil you dug from the hole. Add a little granular low-nitrogen organic fertilizer if desired and begin to fill the hole. When the hole is halfway filled, water in to settle the soil. Finish filling the hole, gently firming the soil around plant with your hands, not your feet as this compacts the soil too much.

Watering and Feeding

Water well after planting. Allow the water to soak in, then water again until the soil is thoroughly moistened and then check regularly to prevent drying out. Aim your hose-end close to the ground, near the base of the plant to water deeply, rather than a surface water.

Week 1: Every day to every other day. Newly planted roots will absorb moisture from a small area until they begin to grow.

Weeks 2-3: Water 2-3 times per week, depending on conditions.

Weeks 4+: Water 2-3 times per week, more in hot/dry conditions. When cooler, water less.

Early morning is an ideal time to water, then late afternoon to early evening as another option. Try to water before 6pm though, so that the leaves have enough time to dry before nightfall as this will reduce the chance of disease.

Less frequent but deep watering encourage perennials to root more deeply and thus become better able to handle drought conditions.

Mulching

Finally mulch around the base with organic mulch but keep away from the main stem to prevent rot. Mulching not only saves soil moisture, but it also acts as a buffer to soil temperature extremes. It also controls weeds and replenishes organic matter and nutrients in the soil. Keep the mulch pulled back from around the perennial stems so it forms a ring around the plant so that water can get down to the roots more easily. Saw dust and grass clippings are not recommended unless composted first. Weed matting in any form (e.g. old carpet) should be avoided. This is certain death to the soil, and eventually, plants.

Apply additional mulch in spring as soils start to warm.

We make and use our own mulch and all-purpose mixes, and these are available for purchase in bulk buy, by the cubic metre or bagged for convenience.

Pruning

Most perennials will need to be cut back in late April/early May when the top growth has died down. It is also the time to lift and divide perennials where overcrowding has occurred. In general, begin pruning after the first display of flowers and stop pruning at the end of the plant's growing season. The closer you prune perennials to bloom time, the more likely there will be a delay in blooms. Throughout the growing season, prune liberally to create a compact and lush plant that will generate constant new growth or prune more conservatively if desiring a taller, less-full plant. There are two types of pruning for perennials, dead heading and cutting back (or thinning).

Dead Heading

Deadheading is the practice of removing spent blossoms to have repeat blooming. Deadheading refreshes a plant's appearance, controls seed dispersal, and redirects a plant's energy from seed production to root and vegetative growth. It can prolong the bloom period or encourage a second flush of blooms on some perennials and keep plants looking tidy. For some plants, new flowers will not grow until spent flowers are removed. When the plant has multiple buds growing along the stems, cut just below spent flowers to create blooms further down the stems. If the plant has stems with singular flowers, you can cut the stem to the base of the plant. Heading annuals and perennials will produce more flowers that bloom for longer, and for perennials, this carries over to the next growing season.

Cutting

Cutting back or thinning greatly improves appearance and flower size and helps prevent disease. You can shape and reduce the size of overgrown or bulky plants by cutting unwanted stems to the base of the plant. Typically, it is good to remove up to one-third of the stems, especially in overcrowded areas where the foliage is beginning to discolour or die. If the plant is simply invading the space of surrounding plants in a bed, just cut outside stems to keep the plant in its place.

For most plants, prune spent flowers and stems back to a point where there is a new lateral flower or bud. If no new flower is apparent, prune the stem back to a lateral leaf.

Not all perennials die down in autumn; for instance, with evergreen perennials, some pruning is required to remove old growth that has produced the previous season's flowers. Doing this will enable the plant to produce healthy new shoots in spring that will carry the flowers for that season.

There are some perennials that should be left throughout the winter for a variety of reasons, including protection, adding winter interest, and helping resident wildlife. Check you know what type of perennials you have.

Pests and Diseases

Check perennial roots, corms, rhizomes and bulbs for any sign of disease before you plant them and plant in well-drained soil.

Perennials may be susceptible to disease due to soil quality, climate, water levels or location. Bacterial and fungal symptoms can grow randomly across a plant and a gardener may not even know of the disease until the symptoms are clearly obvious. Being observant and regularly checking on plant health can help the spread of pests and diseases. A hand lens can be useful.

Fungal Disease including root rots, blackspot, rusts, moulds and mildews will, given the chance, attack perennials as will bacterial and viral diseases and pests. In addition, it might not be an organism causing the disease. Sometimes the plant is diseased because it is deficient (or over supplied) with some nutrient, including water.

Plants with too little water rapidly show symptoms of dehydration and wilting. Without water moving up from the roots to supply the stems and leaves there is also the problem of a lack of the nutrients that would travel with the water. The leaves will often begin to yellow and eventually go brown.

The same is true when the root system is waterlogged. The plant is unable to transport nutrients properly and again the leaves will often yellow, droop and die and roots will rot.

Even with a good water supply if the soil does not contain the nitrogen, phosphorus, potassium and other nutrients that the plant needs to function properly it will sicken, become weak and become susceptible to diseases caused by fungi, bacteria, pests and viruses.

When dealing with diseased plants, hygiene is very important. Dispose of all diseased materials carefully to prevent cross infection- don't use diseased materials in composting systems and if possible, burn diseased material and sterilize garden tools with bleach.

Failure to thrive

There are many reasons why a plant may fail to thrive. Whilst attention to soil and site are key and the right plant for the right site, there are other issues that may cause problems.

- Planting at the wrong time of year (not normally a problem if you have water all year round)
- Plant drying out at any time before or after planting
- Root damage at the time of planting or after planting due to movement e.g. wind
- Over watering
- Poor drainage
- Use of herbicides around the plant or herbicide drift
- Planting in the wrong site or the wrong climate for that particular variety
- Incorrect pruning or pruning at the wrong time of year
- Incorrect planting e.g. too deep or too shallow
- Compaction of soil either before or after planting
- Mechanical damage e.g. scarifiers or hoes
- Weed mat (impervious layer)
- Wind
- Soil contamination e.g. residual chemicals, salinity from tidal activity
- Pests and diseases.

Help and advice

Blue Mountain Nurseries has qualified plant craftspeople on site to advise on the planting and care of perennials.