



Caring for Perennials

OH 26

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First year: mulch, water well and often, special attention and care

Later years: remulch or compost, fertilize, infrequent water if any, prune/divide as needed

Time required: on "average", 60 minutes per 100 sq.ft. per month

- varies with season: spring 90 minutes, summer 60 minutes, fall 30 minutes
- varies with intensity, type, sustainability of planting

Seasonal activities/needs:

- **spring:** clear away dead plant matter, weed and edge, fertilize, mulch/topdress compost, divide, labels
- **early summer:** stake, check for pests, deadhead early bloomers if needed, cut back if needed, keep new transplants watered, re-fertilize if synthetic, keep up with weeds, re-edge if needed, control spreaders
- **later summer:** cut back if needed, check for pests, keep new transplants well-watered, re-fertilize(synthetic)
- **early fall:** divide some (bearded iris, daylilies) and others not done earlier, plant bulbs, soil test and lime if needed, cut back if poor foliage or diseased, re-fertilize (synthetic), check labels
- **late fall:** remove plant matter which wont be attractive overwinter (many daylilies), evergreen boughs over heathers and low evergreens, mulch roses and tender or first-year perennials

Mulching

1) right after planting--conserves moisture, prevents soil crusting (clay), weed control (?), organic matter

- **types:** organic best (bark, smaller chips or double ground), generally softwood, also peat moss, compost, cocoa hulls, other local
- **depth:** 2 inches, keep off spreaders (yarrow), minimal weed control
- **weed control:** at least 6 inches, keep away from base of plants, especially peonies, or 2 inches with thick newspaper (whole sections not sheets) below (not plastic or similar, prevents spread)
- repeat summer mulch beginning of each summer (plants emerged)

2) overwintering--moderate soil temperatures, as above if organic

- **types:** often same as summer mulch, also wintering blankets, minimal from thin fabrics
- **winter blankets:** semi-rigid foam, thick felts, "sandwich"--white plastic (top), any plastic bottom (if pots, none for beds) and minimum one foot packed weed free straw (key if directly on beds) between
- **timing:** late as possible to apply before snow (Thanksgiving?), early as possible to remove (April Fools?)
- **roses:** cones, mound soil/straw one foot or more around base, blankets for beds

Staking

- need varies with cultivar (dwarf), culture (light, nutrition, water), care (pruning)
- posts: wood (1-2 seasons, rots), bamboo (less sturdy), metal (rebar, cap tops)
 - use garden twine, not wire or string-- latter cuts stems, former lasts season
- other: wire cages (rigid or flexible wide mesh), frames (climbing, arching), nets (beds)

Labels

- types: wood (1 year or less, writing fades), plastic (1-2 years, UV cracks), metal (3-10 years), engraved (over 10 years), longer lasting generally more expensive
- markers: varies with label, #2pencil best; "permanent" black marker (1 yr), colored markers (1 month)
- needs vary: show garden, focus or design or plants, even need to know if few or common?

Pruning

ideal, most survive well without any

1) "deadhead" spent flowers

- unless for reseeding as wildflowers (dame's rocket), cottage gardens, short-lived (hollyhock, foxglove), attractive (astilbe, meadowsweet, Siberian iris, Rudbeckia, Sedum), for birds (coneflower, Joe-pye weed, bee balm, rudbeckia)
- may prevent undesirable self-sowing (some bellflowers, geranium, coneflowers, milkweed)
- prolong bloom or rebloom later (yarrow, columbines, bellflowers, delphinium, daylily, beebalm, phlox, salvia, speedwell)
- to side shoot or shear for some (most); to ground/basal for others (carpet bugle, bleeding heart, some geranium, heuchera, hosta)

2) cut back during growth

- keep in their own space (yarrow, wormwood, geranium, bee balm, catmint, creeping phlox)
- aesthetics for early bloomers (columbines, dianthus, dame's rocket, candytuft, beard iris, peonies, oriental poppy, creeping phlox, lungwort)
- aesthetics for summer bloomers (wormwood, tickseed, some geranium, daylilies, lavender, garden phlox, salvia, goldenrod)
- height control for late bloomers (yarrow, aster, boltonia, coneflowers, joe-pye weed, helen's flower, hibiscus, lobelia, bee balm, garden phlox, obedient plant, balloon flower, rudbeckia, sedum, goldenrod, spiderwort, speedwell)

3) **deleaf unattractive foliage** as browns, dies (columbines, bergenia, black snakeroot, dicentra, foxglove, heuchera, hosta, lungwort)

Fertility

- soil test yearly if possible
- acidity (pH) 5.5-6.5, important to make nutrients available
- low analysis (eg 5-3-4) best, low fertility needs in general, too little is better than too much
- organic often is slow release so only add early spring, adds soil microbes and health so better roots
- synthetic lasts 3 weeks avg, so add early spring, early summer, later summer/early fall
- late fertility ok for perennials vs. woodyes
- add year 2 and after, sufficient usually at planting for first year

Dividing

- When? hollow centers, stems thin and topple, flowers small, bottom foliage scant and poor
 - maybe 1-3 years: yarrow, New York aster, astilbe, bellflower, tickseed, Helen's flower, coralbells, bearded iris, shasta daisy, lobelia, bee balm, phlox, obedient plant, speedwell
 - maybe 4-10 years: bergenia, bleeding heart, joe-pye weed, daylily, blazing star, sundrops, rudbeckia, goldenrod, foamflower
 - generally over 10 years: columbine, false indigo, black snakeroot, gas plant, baby's breath, hellebore, hosta, peony
- How, ideally? lift plant, wash/shake soil off, select divisions (minimum 3-5 growing points/bud/eyes), pull or cut apart, replant
 - cutting apart: garden forks back:back, square tip spade, knife, saw, combination
- How, lazy method? divide off chunk with square tip spade in ground

4/07