LaRosa

Landscape Company, Inc.

PERENNIAL CARE

Surprisingly, many perennials require very little care. The following discussion should aid you in the general care and maintenance of your gardens. A newly planted perennial garden requires more care than a fully matured garden. A perennial garden requires three to five years to obtain its full potential. During the first three to five years of your perennial garden's establishment, the quality of care will be reflected in the gardens' maturity, brilliance, and durability.

AN INTRODUCTION TO PERENNIALS

Most of the world's plants are divided into the following categories:

Annual: Plants that germinate, grow, flower, seed and die in one growing season. Annuals usually live one year. Some examples include: marigolds, impatiens, petunias, and crabgrass.

Biennial: Plants that germinate and grow in the first season, and then flower, seed and die in the second season. Biennials generally live two years. Some examples include: canterbury bells, foxglove and Queen Ann's lace.

Perennial: Plants that germinate, grow and occasionally flower in the first season but usually flower the second and subsequent seasons. Perennials come up year after year, and some may require many years to reach maturity. For example, *Trillium* may require five to seven years before flowering when started from seed. Some examples of perennials include: Hosta, *Sedum*, strawberry, rhubarb, peony, *Iris*, daylily, chives, and *Astilbe*.

TYPES OF PERENNIALS

Herbaceous Perennials wither completely to the ground after their growing season. This die back may occur immediately after flowering or the foliage may remain throughout the growing season. A true herbaceous perennial dies to the ground each winter and grows fresh tops each spring from roots and stems that overwinter in the soil.

Evergreen Perennials such as *Dianthus*, coral-bells and *Pachysandra* hold their foliage throughout the winter months, but are commonly called "herbaceous perennials". These perennials typically do not have woody stems.

Woody Perennials have persistent woody stems above the ground all year. Periwinkle (*Vinca*) and moss phlox are examples in this category, as are roses, trees and shrubs (often, though, trees and shrubs are referred to as "woody ornamentals").

WATERING

When installing new perennials, it is important to provide adequate moisture to prevent excessive wilt (although some wilting during midday can be tolerated). Excessive wilt stops or slows plant development and stunts future growth. Check your perennials first thing in the morning to see if they look healthy and upright. Over-head watering may be accomplished with an oscillating fan sprinkler or a watering wand with a water breaker. Where watering is needed much of the time, a more or less permanent system of soaker hoses laying on the ground works well.

Generally a well-established perennial garden requires no more than 1 inch of water per week applied in ½ inch increments. Any natural precipitation over 2/10 inches should be considered when calculating the amount of supplemental watering required. Avoid soggy soils. Woody ornamentals and lawns have different watering requirements and should NOT be watered in conjunction with perennial plantings.

Spring rains generally provide very adequate moisture, but spring droughts do occur. It is also recommended to water newly installed perennials thoroughly in November following the first hard frost of less than 20°F. This ensures them of enough moisture to survive the winter and to prevent dehydration of their rootstock.

FERTILIZATION

Newly planted perennials usually need added fertilizer once or twice during the first growing season. You can use a granular form (a recommended formulation would be 5-10-5) at 2 pounds per 100 square feet, or use a liquid fertilizer at half the recommended rate. This low rate is to ensure that the tender young shoots are not burned and that too much nitrogen is not supplied that would cause excessive leafy growth. A second application can be made six weeks later.

For more mature plantings, three applications are recommended for the year. The first should be made in early spring while the plants are still dormant to ensure a good start as they begin to grow, the second about six weeks into the growing period, and the third in mid to late summer. Any all-round garden fertilizer should provide adequate amounts of plant food.

Another option for the established perennial garden is to use a balanced controlled release fertilizer. This type of coated, granular fertilizer only needs to be applied once at the beginning of the year and should supply all your garden's needs for the season. Apply at the rate indicated on the documentation included with your favorite brand of fertilizer.

MULCH

An organic mulch (such as shredded bark) should be applied in the spring and accomplishes several things for your garden:

1) Reduces weeding, watering and general maintenance.
2) Adds quality humus to the soil as it breaks down, thereby enriching it.
3) Allows quality plant growth without robbing the soil of nutrients.
4) Remains in place without easily washing or blowing away.
5) Lasts 1-3 years before requiring replacement.
6) Prevents rapid temperature change of the soil that could harm roots.
7) Allows for air, nutrient and water exchange.
8) Provides a pleasant color and texture to accent/compliment the home, environment and plants.
9) Minimizes harmful pest habitats.
10) Is cost effective.

In considering the above information, 2-3" of stone mulch would not be as beneficial as other organic mulch choices. Organic mulches are far superior in aiding the health and vitality of plants in the garden.

STAKING/SUPPORT

Some taller-growing varieties of perennials will need some support to keep them looking nice and to prevent them from falling on the shorter plants in front of them. This support should be provided when the plants are still very small. Branching twigs may be used discretely to prop up plants and will be covered up by the leaves of the plants around them. For individual heavy stems of, for example, delphiniums and hollyhocks, a single stake may be used. As the plant grows, continue tying it up the length of the stake.

TRIMMING

When many perennials are finished blooming, removal of the spent flower heads (commonly called "dead-heading") generally extends (and occasionally causes additional) blooming. In some plants the removal of the seed heads is highly recommended as the seeds revert to the wild forms, gradually crowding out prized cultivars. Removing spent flowers also allows the plant to spend its energy on producing healthy roots and storing energy for the winter and next spring instead of on unnecessary seeds.

WEEDING

Always remove undesirable seedlings and weeds from the garden. Mulches drastically help reduce the need for weeding. Weeds compete for moisture, nutrients and space. Weeds also make the garden appear unkempt and may harbor diseases and pests. Try to remove weeds when they are small and manageable. Care must be taken to not disturb the surrounding soil too much. Pulling weeds can bring additional weed seeds to the surface where they can germinate and cause additional headaches. Herbicidal treatments can also be applied if you are careful not to apply them to desirable plantings. Spring applications of pre-emergent herbicides can also provide excellent weed control. As always, for the latter two options, always follow the directions found on the product packaging for safe and correct use.

CLEAN-UP

In autumn, when top growth has died back, trim for neatness as desired. Remove old growth entirely to reduce overwintering fungus and insects. Some leaf debris can be kept on the beds to act as a winter mulch. If this look is undesirable or if pests or diseases are a problem, tender perennials may be protected by a winter mulch of evergreen boughs. This treatment protects the plants against alternating thawing and freezing, which tends to lift plants out of the soil. Try NOT to mulch until the soil has frozen and the plants are dormant. In early spring, remove the winter mulch and any remaining dead plant parts.

Planting of spring bulbs can be done at the time of the fall clean up, but try not to disturb the existing perennials. This is also the best time to guard your garden against unwanted browsers by fencing with hardware cloth to deter rabbits, deer, chipmunks, squirrels and mice.

WHEN TO PLANT PERENNIALS

Perennials may be planted almost anytime the soil is workable. This usually means anytime from March through November 15. Be aware that summer in Wisconsin typically comes quickly and with a lot of heat. Plant stress is often severe, so water freely! Fall planting is another option and works well because it avoids the stress of heat during the summer, and typically nature takes care of the watering requirements. In addition, free leaf mulch from surrounding trees aids in protecting plants for the winter. Autumn plantings will bring pleasant surprises for the following spring.

TRANSPLANTING AND DIVIDING PERENNIALS

Many plants can be successfully moved if done properly by following a few simple guidelines.

Avoid transplanting perennials:
1) When perennial is in full flower.
2) During very active growth.
3) More than twice within one month.
4) During very hot temperatures and drought conditions.

If it is necessary to relocate perennials during these times, severe pruning will be required.

Dividing Perennials: There are basically three reasons for dividing perennials; to control size, to rejuvenate, and to propagate. By nature, most perennials grow larger every year, usually by spreading and making a larger clump. Left alone, the most vigorous of plants can expand until they push out neighboring plants. As clumps expand, they begin to compete with themselves; the plants on the outer edge thrive in fresh soil, but those in the center suffer because they are competing for moisture, nutrients, light, and air. This can result in a circle of healthy plants around a dying center, which is not at all attractive.

The general rule is to divide spring- and summer-blooming perennials in late summer or fall and to divide fall-blooming perennials in early spring. This gives them a whole growing season to reestablish themselves. In climates with extreme winters it's best to divide in early spring rather than subject newly planted divisions to the rigors of the weather ahead.

Before dividing, decide which plants can be saved, which to dig out altogether, and which to replant elsewhere. To make digging and dividing easier, water the bed thoroughly a few days beforehand. Prune the perennials severely, to 6 inches from the ground, so that you can see what needs to be done.

The actual dividing process is simple. Dig the entire clump out as completely as possible. Divide the living portion into smaller clumps and replant where you like. Where roots are so ensnarled that you can't simply pull the plants apart cut them apart with a sharp knife. Another way to divide a stubborn clump is to insert two spading forks into it back to back, and then press the handles toward each other, using the leverage at the tines to pry the clump apart.