

Perennials rule, OK?

If trees and shrubs are the framework of a garden, perennials provide the flesh or padding, says *Teena Crawford*. And despite their bad press, the bonus is that they're easy to work with.

Whether your garden is a suburban quarter-acre block, a small courtyard or a collection of pots on the balcony, perennial plants have the versatility to give it life, growing and establishing quickly to provide a colourful display with both their foliage and flowers.

Gardening with perennials is less work than annuals. Annuals, as their name suggests, grow, flower, set seed and die in one season. New annuals must be planted each season to achieve a continuous display. Perennials, on the other hand, are just that – perennial. They grow leaves, flower and set seed each year, but do not die. From year to year clumps grow bigger, producing more flowers and leaves, giving an even better visual display. And because many do grow quickly, perennials can make your garden look more established in a shorter time, making them ideal to plant as 'fillers' in between slower-growing shrubs and trees.

Traditionally, mixed perennials were grown together in their own garden beds, known as herbaceous perennial borders. These were a common, but extravagant, addition to gardens

in Edwardian times. They contained no permanent trees or shrubs, but instead were planted with elaborate schemes of perennial plants which reached their peak in late spring and, to a lesser extent, autumn, offering little visually for the rest of the year.

It is these borders that have given perennials a bad name, for despite my earlier claim that they are actually less work than annuals, mention perennials or perennial borders to any

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gardener and you will evoke thoughts of labour-intensive cultivation, involving digging, dividing and replanting, staking and tying, disbudding shoots and dead-heading spent flowers.

But it is a misconception that all perennials are a lot of work. In reality, gardening in layers with

trees, shrubs, perennials and groundcovers gives the greatest enjoyment over the longest period with the least amount of work.

What is true is that the perennials traditionally grown in borders were generally high maintenance varieties of English origin, such as delphiniums, ranunculus, dahlia and aster,



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Q Why do some perennials die down into the ground in winter?

A Generally this is a response to the cold temperatures and should be considered a positive feature of the plant. It eliminates the need to do any cutting back after flowering, or pruning of scrappy foliage that has gone brown or been eaten by pests. Perennials that do die down in this way include sedum, wind flowers, some day lilies, cranesbill geraniums and delphiniums. As the new foliage emerges in spring, apply fertiliser around your plants (not directly on the growing shoots) to get the best results.

Q What perennials can I plant that require minimal water when established?

A A lot depends on where you live, but some of the best dry-tolerant perennials are salvia, lavender, artemesia, sedum, cotyledon, crassula, lirioppe, rosemary, echeveria, dietes, nepeta and clivia.

Q I mostly grow produce in my garden. Are there any perennial herbs or vegetables that I can grow?

A Perennial herbs and vegetables to grow include mint, sage, thyme, rosemary, asparagus, rhubarb, ginger and garlic. Remember that, like most herbs and vegetables, they require a sunny position.

chosen by the gardener as a reminder of 'home' rather than for their suitability to the 'new world'. For your garden, consider varieties that originate from countries that have a similar climate to yours. Perennials from California, South Africa and the Mediterranean are suited to the drier regions of Western Australia, South Australia and Victoria, while many New Zealand plants grow well in Tasmania, the Southern Highlands of NSW and the Macedon area of Victoria.

Choosing plants that suit your climate, soil type and their position in the garden will ensure you reap many rewards from perennials, which have so much to offer the modern garden. Of all plant groups, they have the greatest wealth of shapes and forms, different flowers and leaves, scents and colours.

Tall-growing perennials give a garden a feeling of permanence and offer a diversity that guarantees attention even when plants are only a few months old. For instance, the fast-growing melianthus has huge blue-green leaves that can offer a dramatic contrast to neighbouring plants, and miscanthus, which is more akin to giant grass, has fine, wiry foliage that floats in the background and sways in the breeze.

While tall perennials add drama to the garden, however, it is the low and medium-sized varieties that are most useful. Groundcovers act as living mulch and, planted in large groups, provide year-round interest. When in flower, they provide seasonal interest, too.

Carpeting ajugas make an excellent groundcover in shady, moist gardens. French lavender flourishes in a hot climate with little moisture, and rewards the gardener with flowers almost all year round. Canna lilies could be grown just for their large bold leaves that contrast so beautifully with surrounding plants, but during the warmer months a continuous display of flowers adds to the pleasure they give.

Perennials look best when grown en masse. A single hellebore flowering in the winter is pretty, but when dozens or even a hundred or more are grown in a large drift under deciduous trees, a truly breathtaking display is achieved. Planting in multiples also simplifies maintenance by limiting the number of plants in the garden with different cultivation requirements.

In small gardens, replace your lawn with a low-growing perennial such as lirioppe, carex or dwarf mondo. This eliminates many chores including mowing and trimming edges. The flowers of the ginger lily, wallflower and heliotrope will bring perfume to your garden, as will salvia, pelargonium and rosemary with their distinctive, aromatic foliage.

Yucca, beschorneria, agave and echium make excellent accent plants with their strong, architectural form and foliage. And if you enjoy growing and picking your own flowers, plant penstemon, torch lilies, hellebore and ginger lilies.

Gardens are enriched by the inclusion of perennials. Try growing some in yours! ■