

Low Maintenance Gardening with Perennials
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For Week of May 31, 2010

Many landscapes are designed with low maintenance in mind; however, all landscapes require some level of maintenance. Perennials can be a good choice for a lower maintenance landscape, but one must keep in mind that even perennials need some maintenance. Perennial plants are grown for many purposes. They can be used in landscapes to provide summer flowers, winter interest, and even food for wildlife and even for ourselves. Perennials are any plant that completes its life cycle in more than one growing season. Hardy bulbs, trees, shrubs, and herbaceous plants are all considered perennials. Herbaceous plants include hosta, daylily, coralbells, yarrow, and peony, to name a few.

When planting perennials the goal is to provide a natural environment. Thinking about how and where these plants occur in nature can give lots of suggestions about cultural procedures. For example ferns are understory plants in forested environments. What does that tell us about ferns? In nature they grow in cool and moist areas that are shaded by large trees. The assumption can be made that they will grow better on the north side of a building where these conditions might exist. Also, mulching ferns mimic the accumulation of organic matter on the forest floor. Considering the natural environment of different perennials requires a little bit of research. Many books, websites, and even the plant label can give helpful hints.

Hardy bulbs naturalize an area extremely well. Bulbs pop up early in the spring in turf, between other perennials, or even in an annual flowerbed to give early color. Most bulbs enjoy areas of full sun at least during and after flowering. After flowering bulbs work hard to produce sugars to store in the bulb for next year's flowering. Remove the leaves only when they can be removed by pulling on them slightly.

Clumping perennials like hosta and daylily should be cut back in the fall or early spring to give extra room for the new leaves. Spent flowers should be deadheaded throughout the summer to encourage additional flowering. Occasionally clumping perennials should be divided to encourage more vigorous growth. Clumping perennials grow to the outside of the clump. This is what causes these plants to have a bare spot in the middle. Dig the perennial and cut, tear, or use a shovel to make several new plants. Timing of division depends on the species planted. Aster, garden mums, yarrow, coralbells, and dianthus should be divided in the early spring every 1 – 3 years, astilbe and daylily every 3- 5 years, and Siberian iris, hosta, and lady's mantle every 5 – 10 years. In late summer or early fall divide peony, bearded iris, and daylily. Do not divide baby's breath, butterfly weed, clematis and Russian sage.

Following this advice you will be able to have a lower maintenance perennial bed in your landscape. Keep in mind that for every rule in the horticultural world there are several exceptions. Your local garden center can help with selection and cultural information for perennials that they sell.

More information this and other topics can be found by visiting us online 24 hours a day at www.co.pennington.sd.us/extension/extsvc.html, which is updated often, or by calling us at 605-392-2188 or email to ricky.abrahamson@sdstate.edu.