



# GROWING & USING **PERENNIAL PLANTS**

WRITTEN BY JOHN MASON AND STAFF OF ACS DISTANCE EDUCATION

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# PREFACE

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Perennial plants are grown in all sorts of gardens and all sorts of climates. You can find them at sea level, and in the highest mountains; in the tropics and the arctic; and both arid and wet climates. If you choose the right perennial plant for the situation; the results can be wonderful; but as with most horticulture, choosing the best plant for the situation at hand, is critical.

This book has been written to both inspire and enlighten you; and to provide a reference point for choosing and using the right perennials, wherever you might need them.



# CHAPTER 1 WHY PERENNIALS?

A perennial garden is perhaps the ultimate flower garden. Perennials grow fast, are quick to produce flowers, and if you choose the right ones for the right places, can give you an established garden faster than most other types of plants.

When designed and grown well, a perennial garden produces a blaze of colour for many months – starting in spring, flourishing through summer, and beyond into autumn. As one type of flower or foliage finishes, another emerges to give life and colour to the bed. Perennials are one of the most commonly used plant groups in a modern cottage garden.



## What is a Flowering Perennial?

Botanically speaking, a perennial is any plant that lives for more than one or two years. This includes trees and woody shrubs, but most gardeners think of perennials as small flowering shrubs such as geraniums and Marguerite daisies, and herbaceous soft-wooded plants that die back each winter, such as hellebores, campanulas and aquilegias.

## What are Herbaceous Perennials?

Herbaceous is a general term to describe those plants that do not have woody growth. Some herbaceous plants retain their foliage all year and many others have a period of dormancy. These plants often store food in a part of the plant below the ground. They include bulbs, corms, tubers and rhizomes. Plants like these provide some of our most spectacular flowering displays. Some are very fragrant, many others are not..

Herbaceous perennial plants can be used to create a number of different landscaping effects:

- Planted in single varieties in massed beds for a formal appearance.

- Interspersed with other plants in the garden bed in clumps or drifts for an informal effect.
- Planted under deciduous trees in random groups to create a naturalised 'wild' garden effect.

When selecting herbaceous plants, consider how they will look all year round. For many months, they will be dormant and unseen. They also need to be left to die back after flowering, when they can often look unattractive. To be grown at their best herbaceous plants require careful maintenance.

## Using Perennials

Perennials are a diverse group of plants providing the gardener with a wide range of plant material suited to an equally wide range of climate and soil conditions. Whilst trees and shrubs provide the backbone of the garden, perennials, with such diversity of structure, flowers and leaf shapes, fill in the spaces to provide (if chosen carefully) year round colour and interest.

Most perennials are very beautiful but at the same time quite tough – this is a bonus for people living in areas with low rainfall or water restrictions. The diversity of perennials means that you can have a beautiful garden, full of perennial plants, anywhere in the world. There are perennials suited to a Mediterranean climate, wet climates, dry climates, tropical regions and anywhere in between.

Perennials have played an important part in garden design over the centuries;

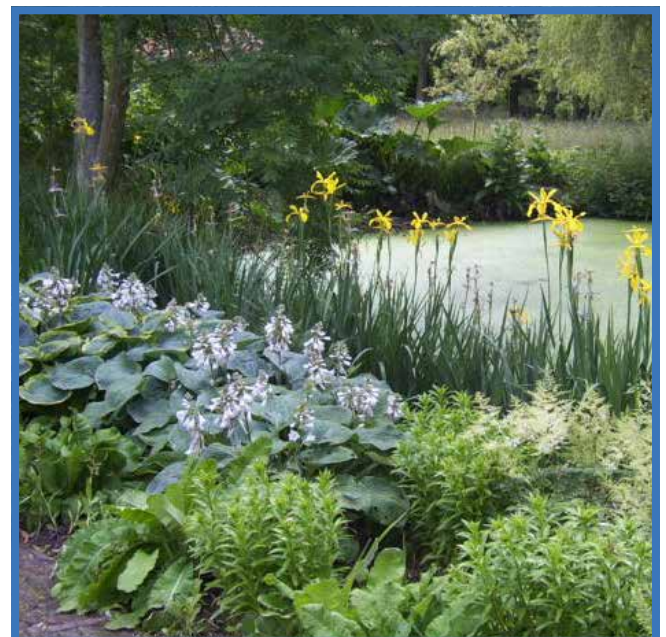
they have been used in the herbaceous borders of grand European gardens as well as in the humble cottage garden. Today perennials are used in similar (if not so labour intensive) ways.

Perennials can be used as fillers for garden beds (such as rose gardens); to line a driveway; to edge walls and ponds; to tumble down embankments or retaining walls; in rock gardens; gravel gardens, in a herbaceous border; in woodland gardens; as ground cover plants and in wild flower meadows.

They can also be used as accent plants to create impact, diversity and movement in the garden, grasses and grass-like plants are an obvious choice.

Most perennials are tough, easy care plants that apart from initial soil preparation, and regular division, will provide the garden with years of colour and interest.

However, you should always research the plants you use in your garden as some perennials can become weedy in certain environments.







## Choosing Perennials

We all want the best value when we go to buy a plant, but how do you tell what is a good deal?

The cheapest plants are not always the best to buy. What is the value in buying something cheap if it doesn't live, or grows slower than a more expensive plant?

To choose the best plant for your situation you should consider:

1. What plant variety you should choose - and then try to source it.
2. Which plant from those easily available you should choose.
3. How much you want to spend.
4. How easy the plants you choose are to care for.

5. Do they suit your garden style?
6. Do they suit your climatic conditions? For example: do they need to be frost hardy, do they need to tolerate wind, dry soils, wet soils, will they suit the pH of your soil, clay soils, sandy soils? And so on.

## Which Variety to Choose

Some plants are very easy to grow, but others are a great deal more difficult. Choose plant varieties according to your own capabilities and the amount of time and effort you are able to devote to caring for the plant.

If you don't have the time to water and feed tender plants, you may be better growing woody flowering plants like roses. If you don't have the time or skills to identify and spray pests and diseases when they come along, perhaps you would be better avoiding roses and