

First Year Perennial Care

by Michael Timm

Whether you are starting a new perennial garden, or are simply adding to your existing beds, or are simply adding to your existing beds, there are some practices you can follow which will help ensure your new plants survival. The key to success is to get the plants to come through their first winter in good shape. Usually if a perennial survives its first winter, it should give you years of enjoyment from then on. Bear in mind, different plants have different life spans. For example: peonies can live 100 years or more, while some plants, like columbine may only live 3 or 4. Don't be frightened away from these short lived perennials though. These plants are usually heavy seeders, providing plenty of successors, and making them appear to live forever.

The first step is to make sure you select the right plants for the right place. As hard as it may be, try not to buy plants on impulse. Always start with your sites characteristics and select your plants accordingly. You will want to consider what plant zone you live in, it will normally be zones 3-5 in Wisconsin. The amount of sun or shade the area receives is a very important consideration. Check the area to see how wet or dry it is before choosing a plant. Lastly, survey the area to see if there are any special considerations such as a downspout or dryer vent?

Another factor associated with the site is your soil. Get to know your soil. Is your soil sandy, full of clay, or somewhere in between? There are plants that need specific soil conditions, but most plants grow best in soil that is well balanced. No matter what your soil condition is, it can be greatly improved by adding organic matter. This can include any type of compost, peat moss, dried manure, etc. Getting your soil tested is also very beneficial because it informs you what may be lacking in your soil and how to improve it.

Now that you have chosen the correct plants for your site, you need to plant them properly. Make the planting hole about twice as wide as the container your plant is in. Place it in the hole at the same level it is in the pot, being careful not to damage the root system. Since this is going to be a permanent home for the plant, it is a good idea to add some extra organic matter to help the plant to thrive. If your plant is flowering, it is a good idea to remove the flowers so the plants energy goes toward establishment and not flowering. Once planted, water the plant in thoroughly. Using a liquid root stimulator at this time is also beneficial because it encourages root development.

Once planted, proper care is crucial. All newly planted perennials need to be watered on a regular basis. Remember, although a plant may be considered drought tolerant, it is only so after establishment. Once a week, if rain is present, or twice a week, if absent, is usually sufficient. Keep in mind each plant variety is different, so get to know your plants.

During the first growing season no extra fertilizer is needed. The extra organic matter added at planting is more than enough. If you desire, you can continue to use the root stimulator once a month. Starting the second year, use a slow release granular fertilizer, designed for perennials. This fertilizer can be used in spring and again mid-summer. Avoid fertilizing in the fall, because this can keep your plants from going into dormancy. Please, never

use highly concentrated liquid fertilizers, designed for annual flowers, on your perennials. This type of fertilizer can burn the plants root system, which will injure your plants severely.

You will also want to keep a close eye out for insects and disease the first year. Any added stress the plant has to endure slows down establishment. Once a perennial becomes established, insects and disease may take away from plant appearance, but will most likely not lead to its demise.

The last aspect we want to focus on is first year winter care. It is not recommended to cut your perennials back the first year before winter. It is best if they are left untouched and cut back in spring. After their first year, most plants can then be cut back in early winter. Since we can not count on reliable snowfall, it is also recommended that newly planted perennials be mulched. Mulching helps prevent the soil from heaving, which can damage the roots and crown.

By following these simple practices you should greatly improve your success with growing perennials. Remember, most perennials take three years to reach maturity, and getting them to and through, their first winter is crucial for proper development. Best of luck and Happy Gardening!