



BEST PERENNIALS FOR NEVADA COUNTY

Good morning, fellow gardeners. We are so happy to see you here for a brand-new workshop, new to us and to you. Obviously, it is a huge topic, and as this is an introduction to perennials, we will cover the basics of working with perennials and then we will tour the garden after the talk and point out perennials and how they are used in the landscape and how we are growing them in the raised-bed area.

When beginning to research perennials, two things really stood out to me: No. 1, patience is a virtue with perennials; and, No. 2, they are really plants that should make up the backbone of our borders and gardens.

Let's start with a little background on what a perennial actually is and how it differs from other plants we grow in our gardens.

Perennials come in two categories, herbaceous and woody. Woody perennials can be either deciduous or evergreen (think trees, shrubs). Herbaceous perennials are a sub-set of deciduous perennials that have softer stems that die back every year to the ground and return in the spring (think peonies).

There are three plant life cycles that most of you are familiar with: annuals, biennials, and perennials. Annuals complete their life cycle in one year (seed, plant with flowers and fruit, die); biennials complete their life cycle in two years (i.e., Sweet William); and perennials are categorized as either short-lived or long-lived perennials that live from 3 years to a lifetime (again Peonies). And let's stop there because we could go into a number of different categories, and I want to keep it simple.

So, my first caveat: Patience. Perennials are best planted in the fall. Spring works, too, especially because there are so many more plants to choose from, but if perennials are planted in the fall, it is cooler, the roots have a chance to get going before winter sets in and they have a head start the following spring. The first year the plants are really growing their roots and putting on vegetative growth. The following year growth continues and in the third year the plant is established and begins to flower and fruit (there are exceptions, of course, especially with short-lived perennials).

It is very important to think about how large the plant will be at maturity. It's good practice to site your plant in the right place under the proper conditions so it can stay put once planted. If you are able, it is also a good planting practice to plant plants with similar light, soil and water needs together. If you are planting a lot of natives or drought-tolerant plants, those will need good irrigation the first year, but after that the water needs will be much less and your plants will thrive when given the proper amount of water. Just remember all plants when first planted need some irrigation, and that is another reason it is beneficial to plant in the fall as Mother Nature can help you.

In the traditional sense, most perennial borders were planted in two different styles: border style or an island bed. Traditionally, the borders were long and rectangular, 2 to 4 feet deep and very long. Today, for ease of working on the bed, a bed 3 feet deep and 12-15' long is a good size if you have the room. If not, be creative. Borders are usually viewed from one side with a fence, wall, hedge, or shrubs serving as the backdrop. You can do a solo bed or a pair. And repeating swaths of plants and colors throughout the border ties it together nicely. An island bed is a garden positioned within a lawn area of irregular shapes and curves. While nice in looks, with lawns being replaced by other plant materials because of water concerns, it could be a different look if your "lawn" is yarrow or something else. Obviously, your perennial bed can be whatever you want. Just remember the rule of 1 (a true specimen), 3 or 5 plant groupings for continuity and flow.

Before you begin your border, you need to assess your site and what conditions exist. Do you get full sun, part sun, shade, or a combination of all of these? Assess your soil (getting a soil test is always a good idea) and decide if you have heavy clay, lots of rocks, sandy soil (not often here), amended soil with compost, etc. Many descriptions of perennials (all plants actually) have soil likes and dislikes listed in the description. Be sure you create a site map or drawing to get yourself organized so you don't go out and buy one of everything and end up with a mishmash of different plants and colors that don't harmonize. Of course, almost every one of us does this to some degree (myself included). We just have to have that spectacular plant, but we can only buy one!

To decide on a shape for your bed, use string with stakes for rectangular borders and hoses for circular or oblong shaped island beds. Delineating your borders with rocks gives a natural look to your bed especially with your ground covers climbing over and through the rocks. Using more than one front of the border ground cover adds interest as long as it's repeated throughout the border.

I feel it's very important to have a mixed border. Bulbs, annuals and biennials and your woody shrubs and trees should be part of your border. With evergreen trees and shrubs, you will create interest all year round. However, remember that established trees and large shrubs can create lots of roots and shade making it much more difficult for other perennials or plants to grow well if they are close.

Research your plant choices and be sure you have flower and/or leaf interest for as long as possible throughout the year. Bulbs, hellebores (shade), Oriental poppies add early interest to the border. Spring is always the thriller part of the year with lupines, peonies, columbine, roses, veronicas, cranesbill, and the list goes on. Dahlias, asters, chrysanthemums, and grasses add late summer/fall interest. The grasses add interest into the winter with golden color and seed heads if left on. Grasses are low maintenance and add the delightful sense of movement in your garden. Most are deer resistant and drought tolerant. My favorites right now are *Miscanthus sinensis* 'Adagio' and 'Morning Light,' *Calamagrostis x acutiflora* 'Karl Foerster,' *Bouteloua gracilis*, blue grama grass; and *Lagarus ovatus*, Bunny Tail grass.

Be sure you are aware of what USDA zone you are in. Our "Western Sierra Foothills Garden Guide," on page 39, discusses the range of zones in Nevada County. They range from Zone 6a (Truckee) to 9b. There are also two maps in the book on frost dates, spring, and fall, for

Nevada County. Just remember that microclimates exist everywhere, and these are just estimates. You can find that information on pages 43 and 44 of the book.

So, I have looked through numerous perennials by several different writers and gardeners. One perennial list you can look through is, again, in our “Western Sierra Foothills Garden Guide” on pages 82-84. And the next three pages list flowering shrubs that work well in our county. I wanted, however, to create another list of favorite perennials that we have grown in our gardens and in our demonstration garden. I am only giving the genus species and common name and I encourage you to walk through our demo garden and see what is growing in our different gardens and in our raised-bed areas. We will have plants to sell on the propagation bench if you are interested.

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FAVORITE PERENNIALS FOR THE FOOTHILLS

Acer palmatum, Japanese Maple
Achillea, Yarrow (various)
Aquilegia, Columbine (various)
Aster (various)
Baptisia, Wild Indigo/False Indigo
Bulbs (daffodils, muscari, scilla, etc.)
Brunnera macrophylla, Siberian Bugloss
Campanula, Bellflower (various)
Caryopteris x clandonensis, Bluebeard
Cerastostigma plumbaginoides, Dwarf
Plumbago
Chrysanthemum, Mum (various)
Coreopsis, Tickseed (various)
Cotinus coggygria, Purple Smoketree Bush
Cranesbill, Geranium (hardy)
Dahlia, Dahlia (various)
Daphne, Daphne (various)
Dicentra luxuriant, Bleeding Heart
Echineacea purpurea, Coneflower
Echinops ritro, Globe Thistle
Eryngium planum, Sea Holly
Eutrochium, Joe-Pye Weed
Oenothera lindheimeri, Guara
Grasses (various)
Helenium, Sneezeweed (look for drought-tolerant varieties)
Helleborus orientalis, Hellebore
Hibiscus moscheutos, Hibiscus (gorgeous flowers, best grown in large pots)
Holodiscus discolor, Creambush
Hosta, Plantain Lily
Iris (various)
Kniphofia, Red Hot Poker (I like the yellow variety)
Lupinus, Lupine (various)
Monarda, Bee Balm, Bergamot
Nepeta, Catmint (various)
Papaver orientale, Oriental Poppy
Penstemon, Beardtongue (various)
Paeonia, Peony, Herbaceous, Itoh & Tree
Phlomis fruticosa, Jerusalem Sage (yellow);
Phlomis purpurea, Purple Jerusalem Sage
Phlox paniculata, Phlox
Lavandula, Lavender (various)
Liatris, Blazing Star
Rudbeckia fulgida, Black Eyed Susan
Salvia, Sage (various)
Scabiosa atropurpurea, Pincushion Flower (short lived)
Scabiosa caucasica, Pincushion Flower
Sedges, Carex (various)
Sedum, Hylotelephium, Stonecrop
Spiraea, Spirea, Meadowsweet
Stachys byzantina, Lamb's Ear
Tanacetum parthenium, Feverfew
Teucrium (various)
Thymus, Thymes (various)
Veronica (various)
Verbena bonariensis
Viburnum (various)

Sources and Articles:

Schmotzer, Constance (Updated 3/14/23). "Care and Maintenance of Perennials," PennState Extension.

Sousa, Mary; Zane, Nadia (2021), "What's Growing On," San Joaquin UC Master Gardeners.

Western Sierra Foothills Garden Guide (2020), University of California Cooperative Extension, Master Gardeners of Nevada County.