



Remember, it never hurts to seek professional advice. You can reach Bob Siren at Diamond Hill Garden Center at 540-297-7009 or email GardenGab@wslk880.com

Weeder's Digest

By Bob Siren

Working in a retail environment affords me constant reminders that the next person who walks into the garden center may not be learned about the terminology that we use in the gardening industry. The last thing that I want is for people to feel intimidated by bloviated hyperbole when they might be just getting started in the wonderful world of plants.

As the late great Felix Unger once pointed out, quoting Oscar Wilde: "When you assume..." (Break down the word, and you will get the picture.)

Assuming that someone knows the difference between an annual and a perennial is a good way to get off to a bad start. In the greater scheme of things, bedding plants are not very expensive, but it's important to know upon the purchase of that plant whether it will either come back next year or that it is a "one season wonder".

Spring time at most Garden Centers explodes with annuals in a wide spectrum of colors. Annuals are those plants that are defined as living for one season, in which they grow, flower all season, set seed, and then die, fulfilling their life cycle. Some can self seed, providing free plants that will sprout the following spring. They can be good, but rarely are they of the same quality or color as the hybridized version that you initially purchased.

Some annuals can be tagged as a perennial, which is defined as a plant that comes back year after year. One pitfall is the growing zone, or temperature lows that a plant can withstand. On average, our region is designated as Zone 7, meaning that typically our temperature lows are between 0 to 10 degrees Fahrenheit. If you plant a zone 8 perennial, which would survive lows from 10 to 20 degrees on average; it would die in a typical zone 7 winter, and therefore is considered to be an annual if planted locally. However, there are no promises or guarantees. Year by year winters can have fluctuating conditions, and our topography lends itself to vastly different growing conditions as well.

One disadvantage to annuals is that you have to either grow them from seed or repurchase them each year. Also, you may have to regularly deadhead them by removing spent flowers and provide extra water to keep them thriving. The bonus flip side is that they generally bloom all season, and you can change the look of your garden or containers year after year by experimenting with new colors and the ever changing new varieties hitting the market.



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Perennials provide the gardener a long term pay off, as they come back season after season. Most are herbaceous, meaning that after a frost, they die back to the ground to emerge again the following spring. For the most part, perennials have a short bloom period, perhaps 2 to 3 weeks, so choosing plants with different bloom times will extend the color in your garden. Woody perennials, such as caryopteris, lose their leaves, but their stems remain throughout winter. They need to be cut back hard in spring so as to strengthen their base, to prevent them from flopping over by late summer when they begin to bloom.

I can remember as a kid, my mother would take me with her to our local garden center every several weeks throughout the growing season, and she would pick out those perennials that were in bloom at the time. I would later learn that this process created a garden that always had something going in and out of bloom, creating a garden that always had something providing color and interest. By intermixing annuals and perennials, your garden will always be alive.

The process of organizing a garden bed can be daunting at first glance, but the secret is in learning to anchor the bed with larger growing plants in the backdrop, with medium to lower growers in the foreground. Perennials are easy to move, and most will benefit from division after 3 to 4 years anyway, but at least start with

the premise of positioning them in drifts and clumps.

Drifts of plants are elongated groupings of like plants that flow through the garden. Planting them in irregular patterns draws interest throughout the bed. Clumps are either more circular groupings, or a lone larger anchoring type plant, providing a bold statement. Foliage, or the leaves of the plant, is an equally important consideration when designing a garden; the short bloom times of some perennials makes this key to a bed design.

The choice of colors in your design is really a matter of personal taste. While I do not think any colors clash in nature, the use of color can be used as a tool for effect. Reds, oranges, and yellows are considered warm colors; they can dominate to the point where they will visually shrink the appearance of a small bed. Cool colors like blue, white, and violet can create a feel of airiness. All that aside, it really is hard to go wrong if you liked what you saw when you bought it.

As long as you follow some basic guidelines, you will do fine. First and most important to any purchase is the location; I can not stress this enough. The amount of sun or shade, early or late, dappled or full strength, is your starting point. After that, consider height and width, bloom time, and finally color. You will not be chastised for your preferences, at least not by me, and there will not be a test.

Light conditions must guide your selections: 2 hours of afternoon sun can equal 4 or more hours of morning sun. In general, a location that gets 3 to 4 hours of afternoon sun should be considered a full sun site. Partial shade translates roughly as up to 3 to 4 hours of full morning sun with shade in the afternoon, or dappled shade all day long. Shade loving plants prefer a site that is dappled all morning and shaded all afternoon. Failure to plant accordingly can lead to a lack of blooming, legginess, stunted growth, or leaf scorch. There is a difference between living and thriving.

Finally, there are plants characterized as biennials, which are plants that complete their life cycle over a 2 year span. If growing from seed: when sown in summer, the plant develops by fall, goes dormant over winter, and then grows the following season, providing blooms, and then dies. If you do not dead head them, they will produce seed and continue the process. Popular biennials include Hollyhocks and Foxglove.

I am not going to tell you that building the perfect garden is easy, or any one method is perfect, but it surely is fun. Let's get growing!