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MAKING THE MOST OF YOUR LONG-BLOOMING PERENNIALS

Since most perennials are in bloom just 3-4 weeks, those that bloom 6 weeks or more (when mature), are considered to be long-blooming. Here are some tips to maximize the bloom time of all your perennials.

First of all, choose the right plant for your location. Most of the signs and / or tags for each variety of perennial provide information on light and soil requirements. If you have any questions, just ask one of the Andy's staff members for help. Try to follow these guidelines for the greatest success with your plants. For example, a sun plant such as *yarrow* (*Achillea*) will not bloom well and the growth will be lax in a shady location. On the other hand, a shade plant such as *bleeding heart* (*Dicentra*) will scorch in all day sun and become stressed, cutting its bloom time short. Likewise, *yarrow* tolerates poor, dry soils that drain well, but may rot in wet heavy soil. *Bleeding heart* loves moist, rich soil and will bloom longer and can even tolerate some sun in those conditions.

It is a good idea to do something to improve the soil when planting any perennial. Since they will be there for more than one year, try to make them comfy. Loosening the soil by rototilling or digging with a shovel can be a big help. Adding organic matter such as peat moss, compost, or aged manure is ideal for improving soil texture. Some advocate working bone meal into the soil for the phosphorus that is slowly releases. Phosphorus helps promote blooms. You may want to test your soil to see if anything else needs to be added. Generally the soil in Miami county is alkaline, so lime is not necessary unless indicated by a soil test.

Once your perennials are planted, proper watering is the next important subject. The first year do not allow the plants to dry out completely. It is best to water deeply and infrequently. A good rule of thumb is to water if it has not rained for 7 to 10 days. Naturally you will want to water your plants at the time they are planted and you may need to water more often if the weather is hot and sunny. *Sedums* are an exception, they need to be dry before being watered or they may rot. After the first year, you probably will only need to water if it hasn't rained for 2 weeks or more, but again pay attention to the needs of your particular plants. Using about 2 inches of mulch can help reduce moisture loss in the soil as well as moderate soil temperature and reduce weeds.

Many people ask about fertilizing their perennials. Some perennials, such as *yarrow*, need little fertilizer, while others, like *astilbe* need to be fed often. Generally, fertilizing will help promote more and bigger flowers. Choose a fertilizer that is higher in phosphorus (the middle number of the three listed, i.e. the 10 in 5-10-5) than nitrogen and follow label directions for mixing and application. Flower beds can also be topdressed with compost to give them a boost.

Finally it is a good idea to cut off old flower heads before they go to seed. This is called dead-heading, and many times can help promote more blooms. The exceptions to this would be plants that you want to reseed, such as *foxglove* (*Digitalis*) and *columbine* (*Aquilegia*). Also come people like the look of seed pods, such as the black seed pods of *false indigo* (*Baptisia*). In general, it is a good idea to keep flower beds clear of dead foliage to help prevent the spread of fungus and disease.

You may also want to cut tall perennials back to 1 to 2 feet in late fall so they don't suffer so much wind damage. Then in spring, after cleaning the dead foliage out, your perennials are ready to go again for another year of beauty and enjoyment.



*Making the world beautiful
one flower at a time.*