REDISCOVERING PERENNIALS FOR SOUTHERN GARDENS

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Colorful landscapes are not just a local trend. They are blossoming on an international scale. The relatively immediate visual impact and low cost of annuals and perennials have fueled their popularity. Their use enables homeowners to update landscapes quickly and economically while making the home more appealing for personal enjoyment or for marketing it to buyers.

Annuals are plants that complete growing and flowering processes in one year or less. In the South's hot and often humid climate, most annuals last for a season or three to four months at most. Perennials, however, are plants that return from the same root part each year. Consumers are fascinated by plants that provide color yet do not have to be purchased and replanted each year.

Once a mainstay of our gardens, perennials lost favor during the last 50 years. Their new prominence has resulted in numerous catalogs offering a broad range of plants. The problem is that few of these sources are in the southern United States, and many of the beautiful perennials they offer are poorly adapted in our growing conditions.

Many perennial species, however, are so well adapted to the south that they are appropriate for use in xeriscape and low maintenance settings. Xeriscape gardens require only small amounts of supplemental moisture. They are gaining favor rapidly in parts of the country where water conservation becomes more important and sensible each year. Plants suitable for xeriscape plantings are far more numerous than the cacti and yuccas commonly associated with this concept.

Early southern gardens often had colorful and beautiful landscapes before sprinkler systems and garden hoses were available. Abandoned homesites and cemeteries attest that many of these plants reliably return each year with little or no assistance from gardeners. Examples include some of the old daffodil and narcissus cultivars as well as crinums (milk and wine lilies), certain salvias, lantanas, verbenas, daylilies, irises, and others.

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USING PERENNIALS EFFECTIVELY

Perennials are versatile plants that may be used widely throughout the landscape. They make attractive borders, mixed borders, cutting gardens, container plants, cottage or woodland gardens, or pockets of color. For the homeowner interested in quickly livening up a landscape, pockets of color can be created easily with perennials.

Most home landscapes have enough evergreen shrubs to avoid a totally bleak look, but they offer little seasonal change or flower color. By enlarging planting areas in front of evergreen shrubs, modest sized spaces for clumps or drifts of seasonal color may be designed. A quantity of the chosen flower must be planted, however, so that the effect is not just a "spot" in the overall picture. Shrubs and nearby trees may have laced the potential planting area so completely with their roots that their removal is necessary to allow flowering plants to thrive.

For most homeowners, the space they can maintain comfortably in annuals or perennials is relatively small. It seems sensible to concentrate plantings where they will be seen and enjoyed most. Possibilities for pocket planting include masses or borders of low growing daylilies or irises in front of evergreen shrubs. Entrance areas are another logical place for welcoming arrays of color.

For pockets of color around outdoor living areas, swimming pools, and entrance courts, containers offer the answer. Portability is a special asset of container plants because they usually can be moved to a less prominent location when not at their best.

With long growing seasons and relatively short winters, landscape maintenance in the South becomes an almost year-round affair. By selecting well-adapted perennials and placing them in strategic places, year-round color can be practical

CHOOSING LOW-MAINTENANCE PLANTS

A major cultural requirement of most perennials is division. Some species require annual division while others need to be undisturbed for several years. A good rule of thumb for deciding when to divide is that most perennials thrive best when divided in the season opposite their peak flowering. Therefore, spring-flowering species should be divided in fall, and summer-flowering types in winter or early spring.

Many perennial species are suitable for southern landscapes (see Table 1). With careful selection, every season can include flowering perennials. Perennials generally require less maintenance than annuals. Because they do return each year, they can be a wise gardening investment.

Table 1. Perennials with potential for the U S. southern states

Scientific name	Common name	Exposure[1]	Flower color	Flowering season	Height
Aquilegia hinckleyana	Hinckley's columbine	Sh	yellow	spring	18 in
Bletilla striata	Chinese ground orchid	Sh	purple, white	spring	1-2 ft
Crinum bulbispermum	milk and wine lilies	E	pink, white, striped	spring summer, fall	3-4 ft.
Dianthus spp	garden pinks, carnations	E	pink, red purple	spring	1-2 ft.
Gladiolus byzantinus	hardy gladiolus	S	purple, white	spring	2-3 ft.
Hamelia patens	firebush	S	red-orange	spring, summer, fall	3-4 ft
Hippeastrum bifidum	oxblood lily	E	red, rose	late summer, fall	1 ft
Hippeastrum Johnsonii	× hardy red amaryllis	S	red	spring	2 ft
Iris fulva × *I giganticaerulea* × *I brevicaulis*	Louisiana iris	E	many	spring	3 ft
Iris orientalis	spuria iris	E	yellow, white	spring	3-4 ft
Lycoris radiata	red spider lily	E	red	fall	1-2 ft
Muhlenbergia lindheimeri	Lindheimer's muhly grass	S	blue-gray foliage	3-4 ft.	
Narcissus spp.	narcissus	E	yellow, white	spring	1-2 ft
Oxalis crassipes	oxalis	E	pink, white	fall, spring	1 ft.
Penstemon cobaea	wild foxglove	S	purple, lavender	spring	1-2 ft.
Schizachyrium scoparium	little bluestem	S	blue foliage	3-5 ft	
Tulbaghia violacea	society garlic	E	lavender	spring, summer, fall	18 in
Viola odorata	sweet violet	Sh	purple	winter spring	6-8 in

[1] Key. S = Sun Full or Partial, SH = Shade, E = Either shade or sun

Table 1 includes perennial plants that appear to have considerable potential for the South. Propagation of bulb-forming perennials is often slow and uneconomical. The key to success with many of these is finding crops to propagate commercially and grow them for profit.