

# Maintaining PERENNIALS in your landscape



Montana presents a harsh environment for landscape plants. High soil pH, low humidity and precipitation, Chinook conditions and fluctuating winter temperatures can take their toll on even the hardiest perennial. To maintain a beautiful landscape, it is very important to give your perennials the proper care they need to thrive.



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## Watering

**Spring**—Water sheltered plants and dry areas underneath house overhangs.

**Summer**—Frequency of summer watering is dictated by the weather, the soil type and the plant's water requirements. Water early in the day to avoid going into the evening with wet, disease-susceptible foliage. Water thoroughly, to a depth of 8-10 inches, to encourage deep root penetration. Soil should dry out a bit between watering. Waterlogged soil will encourage root disease and excludes oxygen, resulting in shallow-rooted, drought-prone, instable plants.

**Fall**—Water frequently, especially during dry spells. Just before the ground freezes in late fall, water all plants heavily again to prevent roots from being damaged in cold, dry soil.

**Winter**—When clearing snow from walks and driveways, pile some soft snow over tender plants and onto flowerbeds that are underneath house overhangs. Snow provides moisture and acts as insulation to prevent plant damage or death caused by freezing and thawing during and after winter warm spells. Do not do this if you use a lot of salt on your walkways. If there is an unusually warm, dry spell in late winter, water exposed flowerbeds, particularly those on the south or west side of the house.

## Fertilizing

Perennials need constant nourishment to stay healthy. Regularly adding organic matter, like compost or peat moss helps. Most perennials also benefit from regular applications of fertilizer. Use a complete, slow release granular fertilizer, such as Osmocote in the spring and early summer as plants are actively growing. If the perennial bed begins to lag a bit in the summer, use a water soluble foliar fertilizer such as Miracle Gro or Peters to give your plants a boost. Stop fertilizing in mid-summer, around August first. This will give the plants time to harden off for winter. In the spring and early fall (mid to late September), scatter a few handfuls of bone meal on the soil around your plants. This helps strengthen their roots and promotes blooming. **Note:** over-fertilizing with nitrogen promotes vegetative growth at the expense of flowering and increases the need of staking.

## Weeding

Weeding is important because weeds compete for nutrients and water. Your first chore is to be able to distinguish weeds, even at the seedling stage, from desirable perennials. Once so distinguished, weeding can be done by hand, with shallow cultivation, with herbicides, or largely avoided by using mulches.

## Mulching

Adding a 2-4 inch layer of mulch helps control weeds, reduces water loss, moderates soil temperature changes and prevents mud splattering of foliage and flowers. Mulches can consist of biodegradable materials, such as compost or bark, or non-biodegradable, such as decorative rock. Compost and bark mulches are good to use because they add nutrients to the soil as they biodegrade. These mulches may need to be added every year. If using rock mulches, you should add a layer of Tytar weed fabric underneath to help control weeds and to prevent the rocks from "sinking" into the soil.

## Deadheading

The removal of spent blooms improves the appearance of the perennials and prevents the investment of energy in seed production. It also encourages the plant to continue blooming, and may stimulate a second flush of blooms. A few perennials like Autumn Joy sedum, Black-Eyed-Susan, and ornamental grasses should be allowed to retain their seed heads for their winter interest.

## Staking

Giving a physical support to the individual stems or to the plant as a whole, is often necessary for those perennials with a natural tendency to fall over because of their height, habit, or weight of blooms and foliage. Tall plants, such as delphinium and hollyhocks, may require individual stakes for support. Select stakes that will be at least 3/4 as tall as the individual stems they are to support when firmly anchored into the soil. Tie the stems to the stakes with a soft material. Stake bushy, multi-stemmed, floppy perennials such as asters, peonies and coreopsis with a wire hoop or by pushing 3 to 4 stakes into the soil around the perennial. Then tie up the plant using a soft material such as twine or floral tape. Put the supports in place early in the season before young shoots are too tall. The plants then grow around and through to eventually disguise the support.

## Perennials in Containers

The volume of soil in most containers is not adequate to prevent the roots of perennials from freezing and dying over winter. In cold winter areas like ours, perennials growing in patio containers should be transplanted into the garden. Allow at least two to three weeks prior to freeze-up in the fall for roots to become established.

## **Cutting Back**

On warm fall days, many gardeners call wondering if it is okay to cut back perennials. We have found over the years that leaving pruning until spring increases plants' survival rates over the winter. Growth left standing traps snow, and, for plants and roots, snow is the best protection against cold.

- As soon as the garden is dry enough to walk on in the spring, clear away debris left from fall. Cut back dead growth from perennials to about 2 inches high. Leave all green growth intact.
- Never cut back evergreen perennials (see evergreen perennial list). Cutting these plants back will at best prevent them from flowering next season, and at worst result in their death.

If you decide to cut back your plants in fall, keep a few things in mind which will result in a more spectacular show of flowers next season:

- Wait until plant leaves become brown and dry: green foliage helps feed roots, and strong roots are needed for plants to get through winter intact. Some perennials won't turn brown until after a hard frost.
- Don't cut back perennials that were planted this year. New plants need the extra protection that snow provides, and leaving top growth intact helps trap snow.

## **Evergreen Perennials**

The following are evergreen perennials which should **not** be cut back at all, only cut off dead foliage:

*Bergenia, Candytuft, Dianthus, Hens and Chicks, Hollyhock, Lavender, Lewisia, Phlox (creeping), Rockcress, Sandwort, Saxifraga, Sedum (creeping), Sisyrinchium, Thrift, Thyme, Tiarella, Vinca, Yucca*

## **Incomplete Dormant Perennials**

Most perennials die back to the ground and regenerate from the roots or underground stem tissue. Some perennials, however have an "incomplete dormancy". This means the foliage dies back to a rosette at or slightly above the soil line; spring growth resumes from the rosette. When you cut these perennials, be sure not to cut into the rosette. The following is a list of Incomplete dormant plants:

*Ajuga, Artemesia, Aster, Campanula, Catananche, Cerastium, Coral Bell, Coreopsis, Daisy, Dianthus (Sweet William), Doronicum, Gaillardia, Geranium, Helenium, Jacob's Ladder, Painted Daisy, Penstemon, Primrose, Salvia, Soapwort, Scabiosa, Spurge, Sweet Woodruff, Yarrow*

## **Dividing Perennials**

After two or three years many perennials should be divided. It's time to rejuvenate a plant if the center has died out, if the plants are overcrowded, or if blooming has diminished. The timing of division is often dictated by the flowering date. Perennials that bloom in the spring or early summer are usually divided in the fall or after the foliage dies back. Summer and fall-flowering types are divided in early spring before growth begins.

### **How to divide perennials:**

- Cut back foliage of larger plants by 2/3. Avoid damaging new growth.
- In the spring, divide plants when new growth is at least 1-2 inches but less than 4 inches tall.
- Carefully dig around the plants. Lift out the entire clump, including as much soil as possible.
- **Method A: Large Perennials**  
Use a garden shovel to split the plant into 2 or 3 pieces. Each piece should have at least 3 stems and lots of roots.
- **Method B: Small Perennials**  
Use a sharp knife to divide the root into 2 or 3 separate pieces. Make sure each piece has a growing point and some roots.
- **Method C: Easily Separated Perennials**  
Some perennials can be easily pulled apart with your hands. Ensure that each set of leaves has its own stem and roots.
- Loosen the soil in the bottom of the original hole. Add a couple of inches of peat moss or compost and mix in thoroughly. A handful of bone meal aids root development.
- Firmly plant one segment into the old hole. Place other divisions elsewhere in the garden or pot them up and give them to friends. In some plants, the center portion dies out with age and should be discarded.
- Perennials being divided should be replanted or potted as soon as possible.
- Pack soil firmly by tamping it with your hands.
- Leave a slight rim of soil around new transplants to hold moisture more readily. Water well, and fertilize with a half-strength solution of Miracle Gro or Peters.
- If dividing in the late summer or fall, do it early enough so that the plants can establish themselves before winter, usually before mid-October.

The following is a list of perennials that benefit from dividing and the proper method to use.

### **Plants to divide using Method A:**

*Aster, Bergenia, Bleeding Heart, Daisy, Daylily, Delphinium, Echinacea, Geranium, Helenium, Jacob's Ladder, Joe Pye Weed, Lady's Mantle, Ligularia, Monarda, Penstemon, Peony, Phlox (garden), Poppy (oriental), Rudbeckia, Salvia, Snow on the Mountain, Soapwort, Trollius, Veronica, Yarrow*

### **Plants to divide using Method B:**

*Anemone, Astilbe, Cerastium, Chrysanthemum, Coral Bell, Coreopsis, Dianthus, Fern, Gaillardia, Hosta, Pasque flower, Phlox (creeping), Sedum (upright), Yucca*

### **Plants to divide using Method C:**

*Campanula, Creeping Jenny, Hens & Chicks, Iris, Lamium, Liatris, Lily, Lily-of-the-Valley, Primrose, Rockcress, Saxifrage, Sedum (creeping), Thrift, Strawberry, Thyme*

### **Plants that should not be divided:**

*Artemesia (silver mound), Baby's Breath, Balloon Flower, Butterfly Flower, Candytuft, Cimicifuga, Clematis, False Indigo, Flax, Foxglove, Gas Plant, Hollyhock, Honey-suckle, Hops, Lupine, Oenothera, Poppy (Iceland), Russian Sage, Sea Holly, Spurge, Statice.*

Most perennials should be divided in the Spring. The following is a list of plants that should be divided in the fall or after flowering in the summer:

### **Plants to divide in the late summer or fall:**

*Bergenia, Bleeding Heart, Daylily, Iris, Jacob's Ladder, Lilies, Lily-of-the-Valley, Peony (divide infrequently), Phlox (creeping & tall), Poppy (oriental), Sweet Woodruff, Trollius.*

**This brochure is designed to give general guidelines for caring for perennials. If you have any questions about specific perennials, please feel free to give us a call. We are happy to answer any questions you may have.**



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