

HOW TO HAVE COLOR EVERY MONTH IN YOUR PERENNIAL GARDEN

THE BASICS

1. The average perennial blooms for three to four weeks. When buying perennials, ASK an experienced, knowledgeable gardener EXACTLY when that plant blooms *in your area*. For specific information on perennials in southern Connecticut, please refer to the Natureworks catalog or the Natureworks Succession of Bloom book.. Do not be fooled by fancy color catalogs that proclaim every plant “blooms all summer”. Very few plants do.
2. If you base your purchases on plants that are in flower at the time of purchase, you will tend to have a very unbalanced garden. Most people buy a majority of their plants in the spring and early summer and buy only what is in flower. This leads to a late summer and fall garden that is green, devoid of color, and often cut back and unsightly. If you must buy plants only when in color, plan to do so EVERY month of the growing season from March until late October or early November!
3. It is important to realize that the **species and varieties** of plants within a genus vary greatly in their habits and bloom time. For example, not all Veronicas bloom in June and early July. Some begin in July and bloom until hard frost in late fall. Explore the *specific* bloom periods of the specific cultivars to expand your season of bloom possibilities.
4. Beginning gardeners should use lots of long blooming perennials. Refer to the list in the front of the Natureworks catalog. To encourage long bloom, do the following:
 - a. Deadhead often to prevent seed set and thus encourage new flower formation
 - b. Feed in the spring and AGAIN in July to provide the energy for the plants to keep blooming. Be sure to use a fertilizer high in phosphorus which promotes bloom (this is the middle number in a fertilizer formulation)
5. Some plants bloom heavily in the spring and/or early summer, take a break, and then repeat bloom in the fall. They are usually cut back hard after blooming and fed in midsummer to encourage a heavy rebloom. To learn more about this perennial pruning process, attend our Saturday morning garden walks in the summer and participate in the hands on process. These techniques are also clearly described in the book The Well Tended Perennial Garden by Tracy Disabato-Aust.

HOW TO TRACK THE COLOR IN YOUR GARDEN

1. Draw a blank Season of Bloom Chart from March till October
2. If you have an existing garden, chart all of the plants in your garden on the Season of Bloom chart, showing when they start and finish blooming. If they take a break and repeat bloom later in the season, use a dotted line for the non-blooming periods.
3. Try using erasable colored pencils to record the color of each flower so that you can better see how the colors combine.
4. Feel free to write in brief descriptions under each plant name (height, shape, texture, form, etc.) to help you remember what they are.
5. If you are designing a new garden, use the process described above to track all of the plants as you add them to your plan.

6. At any time, you can run your finger down any month, or any week of any month, to see what will be blooming at the same time.
7. You may want to include foliage plants at the bottom of the chart. This will be quite useful if you use colored foliage, as they will add to the color palette in your garden.

TRICKS OF THE TRADE

1. If you simply focus on color, you will still find that your garden looks unsightly at various times during the growing season. This is because you will be deadheading and cutting back plants, leaving “eyesores” in various places. It is important to learn just what to expect from each perennial before, during, and after bloom. Thus, the down times in a perennial’s life cycle can be dealt with by directing the eye to other plants.
2. Learn which plants go completely dormant after blooming (i.e., completely disappear) and which plants sprout late in the season. Both of these types of plants leave big gaps in the garden.
3. Foliage is your best friend when planning for color every month. As perennials go in and out of bloom, those with excellent foliage structure will hide the gaps left by cutting the plants back. Even better are plants that have variegated or colorful foliage as they add constant color.
4. When a plant is going out of bloom, going dormant, getting cut back, or hasn’t sprouted yet, draw the eye away from that unsightly area by placing other perennials or groupings of perennials nearby that are just coming into peak bloom. Thus, YOU, as the garden planner, can lead the viewers eye away from the eyesore right to a display of beauty.
5. Get extra color in your garden by embellishing with bulbs. Tuck clusters of spring, summer, or fall blooming bulbs *in between* the crowns of the perennials. That way, you can fit twice as much color in the same space.
6. Allow self-sown annuals, biennials, and perennials to appear amongst the plants, especially if you embrace the cottage garden style. Caution should be used to thin these “free gifts”, so that they don’t take over the garden. This is especially important as your garden matures.

THE GARDEN JOURNAL

It is important to analyze how your garden is doing on a regular basis. Keep a garden journal. In it, take notes about the color gaps that you see. If you are missing early color, write down that you need to add spring blooming bulbs the following fall! If one plant is taking over, make a note of it so the garden can be rearranged in the early spring or in the fall when the weather is usually cool and moist.

If you can correct color gaps right away, the problem is solved. Often, however, the corrective planting or rearranging has to wait for many weeks or months. Writing down your observations assures you will remember when the time comes.

Sources for Succession of Bloom in the Perennial Garden Book:

1. Natureworks website www.naturework.com Choose Products then Books
2. Natureworks Garden Center 518 Forest Rd, Northford, CT 06472 203-484-2748
3. Your local library may also have it.

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