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PERENNIAL BORDERS

Beauty begins at home. The appearance of any community depends on each homeowner. Beautiful surroundings transform houses and lots into attractive and enjoyable neighborhoods. A well-planned flower border will make an effective contribution toward this goal. The size, of course, will depend not only upon your property, but on how much time you have to work in it. Remember – to be effective a border must be maintained.

For beginning gardeners or for people who rent homes this flower border may be composed entirely of annuals. Annuals are plants that live for one season and must be replanted each year. For established homeowners, however, this flower border should be made up mainly of perennials. Perennials come up year after year giving the homeowner long lasting appeal. It is usually then referred to as a perennial border.

The perennial border has many advantages. First of all, the plants last for several years and replanting is not necessary each year. Permanent color effects can be planned and a succession of bloom can be worked out. You obtain maximum effect for the least amount of labor. You can't, however, neglect these plants and expect them to take care of themselves.

Bulbs, annuals and biennials are usually included in the perennial border plan. Perennials provide the backbone of the border, while bulbs give early spring color and annuals fill in where early flowering perennials have already gone by.

LOCATION

There are four questions you should ask yourself when locating your flower border:

1. Will the border receive sun?
2. Will the border be seen easily from the house?
3. Will the border have a good background?
4. Is the soil well drained?

1. The first consideration in making borders should be exposure or sun. Whenever possible locate the garden so that it is in full sunlight during the greater part of the day. This is important because many of our best flowering plants require a maximum amount of sunlight. If, however, you are not able to get a garden located in full sunlight, there are interesting and fascinating plants which will do well in the shade.

2. The flower border should be located, if possible, so that it can be seen to good advantage from the most used rooms in the house – the living room, dining room, or kitchen. In this way, one's enjoyment of the garden is multiplied. Generally, the perennial border is at one side or in back of the house rather than in front. This is particularly true in residential areas where the homeowner wants privacy while working or resting in his garden area.

3. Another important consideration is the background of the border. The border shows off to better advantage and in most cases grows better against a background than when it stands free. This is because it is less exposed to wind and cold. Stonewalls, sides of buildings, trellises, fences, or shrubs all make successful backgrounds for a border. Allow at least 3 feet between background and border for air circulation and to facilitate seasonal maintenance.

4. If possible a well-drained area should be selected. It will allow water to run off and the soil to dry out early in the spring. This will lessen danger from winter injury to the perennial plants.

There is little that can be done as far as choosing soil types is concerned. The gardener can, however, take what he has and improve it so that it suits his growing requirements.

SOIL PREPARATION

Good soil preparation is perhaps the keynote to successful gardening. A poorly spaded soil may mean the death of newly set plants or lack of growth through the season. Also, a well-prepared soil is generally easier to cultivate throughout the summer.

Some form of organic matter, such as peat moss, leaf mold, well-rotted manure, or compost, should be added. These can be applied at the rate of 3 bushels per 100 square feet of ground area and must be thoroughly worked into the soil. At the same time, add commercial fertilizer such as a 5-10-10 (parts nitrogen, phosphorous, and potassium) or similar analysis. Add these at the rate of 3 pounds per 100 square feet. If it is a well-established perennial border, make one application in early spring and another about July 1. In this case, the fertilizer should be distributed around the plants being careful not to get any on the foliage.

DESIGNING THE BORDER

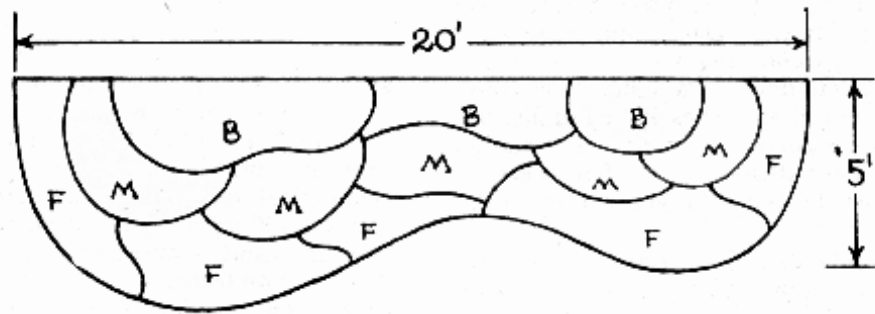
Size: Borders should be planned at least 6 feet wide and may be as long as you can care for. For a good showing of color from early spring till late fall, the border may be up to 12 feet wide. Twelve feet is the maximum width for ease of maintenance. A wider border cannot be watered and weeded easily and the same maintenance problem of large beds or plots arises. A good medium width would be 8 or 9 feet.

An annual flower border should be narrower than a perennial border because there is less range in plant height. It is well to keep the annual border 4 to 6 feet in width, while the perennial border may be 8 to 10 feet in width. Here again, size depends upon the plants to be grown and the size of your property.

It is not necessary to border the entire lawn area with flowers. A short, well-cared for border will give you a much better effect than a long, straggly, weedy one. You can pick the best drained and sunniest location for the flower border and plant flowering shrubs in other areas of your home landscape.

Edging: The front edge of the border may be either straight or gently curved. A long gentle curve can be easily laid out with a garden hose. Short scallop-like curves are not good design. They cause the eye to divide the border into short segments. On the other hand, a long gentle curve has an elongating effect which gives the illusion of greater length to the border.

A straight-line border is very definite and formal. While it does not give easy grace of the curved edge, it does not give the short, choppy effect of the scalloped-edge. At the same time, the straight-line edge is the easiest to maintain.



Above is a typical bed indicating location of background (B), middle ground (M) and foreground (F) flowers.

Arrangement of plants: Before you plant, begin by planning your garden on graph paper so you can better visualize the final effect. Outline the size, shape of the garden and the placement of the plants. Allow ample space for each plant to grow and then write the name in the space as shown in the example border. One of the most common mistakes made by the amateur gardener is in using so many plants and not giving enough distance between plants for each variety used. Also, he/she fails to develop large bold masses and instead relies on a collection of single plants. In the latter case, the whole effect of the border appears spotty.

Height: Plants should be so arranged that the tall plants are in the background, medium sized plants are in mid-border in front of the tall plants and low plants are along the front edge of the border. If this rule is strictly followed, it would result in the so-called ribbon garden: a row of tall plants, a row of mid-border plants, and a row of edging plants. To prevent monotonous ribbon planting, stagger plant groups so they are not directly behind one another and allow some tall back border plants to thread back into mid-border thus giving a well blended appearance.

Place individual perennial plants at a sufficient distance to allow future growth. Back border plants should be placed 3 ft. apart, mid-border 2 ft. apart and front line plants at least 1 ft. apart.

Continuous Bloom: Besides height also consider the time of bloom of each variety. Most annuals, if properly grown, will give continuous bloom through the season. With perennials, it is much more difficult to attain this goal. It means that you must know when certain perennials will bloom before designing the garden. For this information, refer to your seed or plant catalog or consult other fact sheets available through your County Extension office.

Be sure to select varieties in the same plant group to give succession of bloom in the border like early, mid-season and late flowering peonies. Choose the same way with Phlox, Hemerocallis and hardy mums. Combine these plants with filler plants which will flower for a specific time when color may be lacking in your border. In placing the plant groups, do not have adjoining groups blossoming at the same time. Spread them randomly throughout the border to create a pleasing balance. This can easily be done by selecting 2 or 3 good plant combinations and place them where they will show off to the best advantage in the border. All other plants which are placed in the border are subordinate to the 2 or 3 main groups. Choose the subordinate plants so as to enhance the beauty of the dominant groups. Examples of plants which group together well

are delphinium, peony and hosta or phlox, iris and candy tuft. Use an X to represent each plant on your border plan.

Color: Basic colors which go together should be borne in mind. Yellow, blue and orange for example, make an interesting combination. Bright reds, yellows, oranges and clear whites are strong colors. Blues, purples, shades (maroon, mahogany-orange) and pastels are weak colors. To create an illusion of greater length or distance, strong colored flowers are planted closer to the viewpoint and weak colored flowers are planted at the farther end of the border. The strong colors will seem to come forward and weak colors will seem to recede. Weak colors should be sparsely planted in the area of strong colors to maintain a pleasing balance.

If the border is to be seen mainly at some particular time, such as the afternoon, or just in the evening (as when you plan backyard suppers), special color effects can be planned. For bright daylight effect, the delicate pastels, subtle shades and weak colors can be used to full advantage. However, for evenings, a border with a white, yellow or orange color scheme would be most effective. Weak colors, pastels, shades and reds do not show up well in the twilight.

Label each flower group on your plan for color. To better visualize what colors will be flowering when, make 3 copies of your border, coloring those plants in bloom for spring, summer and fall.

Texture of plant foliage must not be overlooked when selecting flowers. The tendency is to think only of flower color and forget the foliage. For example, a very pleasing foliage combination is Stokesia, Dianthus and Linum planted in front of Iris and Phlox. Another suggested foliage combination is Artemisia in with hardy mums and German Iris. Besides leaf size and shape, consider the color of the leaf. Perennials such as artemisia, lamb's ear, santolina and lavender have a gray foliage which compliments the darker green foliage of most plants.

Source of Plants: Plants may be raised from seed, purchased or procured from a neighbor. Good seeds and good plants are the best guarantee you have of producing good results.

Planting of Perennials: Do not try to set an entire border at one time because each perennial has its ideal transplanting time. A good rule to follow is: flowers that bloom in the fall divide in the spring; flowers that bloom in the spring divide in the fall; and flowers that bloom in mid-summer take a choice of spring or fall for transplanting. For example, peonies are best divided in the fall. Chrysanthemums in the spring and phlox in either spring or fall. If you start your perennial border in the spring it will be necessary to use some annual flowers until it is time to set the other perennials in the designated spots.

If you are purchasing your plants, plant them into the border as you can afford them. Or try raising plants from seed or swapping with your friends for the special plants to fit into your plan. Do not get into the habit of planting everything offered to you. After you have made your plan, stick to it. You may be able to substitute plants of the same height, color and time of bloom for particular spaces. But if you cannot fill in all of your plan with the proper perennials right away, use annuals in the empty spaces until you can. Only in this way can you have a planned flower border which will bloom just as you want it to.

Once the soil has been properly prepared and leveled off, mark the groups as described by your pre-drawn plan using a stick or hoe handle. Space the young plants or divisions on the soil and then before setting each plant, dig a good sized hole. Spread out the roots and draw the soil back

over the roots. The plants should be set at the same height as grown originally, because planting too deep encourages rotting. Firm the plant in and water well.

Your perennial flower border will add beauty to your home landscape for many years to come. This can all be enjoyed with a considerable savings of time and money. Your perennials will greet you each spring with new growth and flowers to come, eliminating the need to repurchase and replant new plants.

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