

Annuals or Perennials?

Designing a garden is exciting and creative, but sometimes it can be a little intimidating. As a result, novice gardeners frequently ask – annuals or perennials, which ones should I use?

Annuals are plants that complete their life cycle in one season: a seed germinates, grows, blooms, sets seeds and then dies. Perennials grow and bloom over the spring and summer and most die back to the ground in the winter. In the spring, perennials return on the same root-stock. They live an average of three to five years or more before they need replacing. Peonies, however, can live happily for 50 years or more.

Using annuals in your garden provides maximum colour in minimum time. They inject long-lasting colour into the landscape from spring until the first killing frost of autumn. In new landscapes, annuals are colourful fillers between young shrubs and perennials, brightening up bare spots and corners. They come in every colour, shape and size to suit your design needs.

However, today with easy access to specialty garden nurseries and seed catalogues, it is easy to invite exotic plants, such as bougainvillea, palms and hibiscus onto your patio.

On the downside, annual plants are maintenance intensive. They need close watching for watering, fertilizing, weeding and deadheading. Initially, they are inexpensive to purchase, but they are more costly in the long run as they need to be replaced annually.

Perennials are herbaceous (green or soft-stemmed) plants that bloom for one to three weeks per season. Their initial cost is greater, but they are permanent additions to the garden. Furthermore, perennials increase in size and will need to be divided every three or four years.

With proper plant selection, your garden design can provide year-round interest. Signaling the end of winter, crocuses, tulips, and daffodils burst forth to greet the spring. Ushering in the hot summer, a parade of foxgloves, daylilies and coneflowers change the landscape. Marching forward into autumn and the cooler weather, brilliant colours of red, scarlet, orange and yellow foliage take centre stage. Sedums, asters, mums and ornamental grasses make their entrance. While the garden is resting for the winter, seed heads, stems, berries and foliage attract overwintering birds searching for food.

Can't decide whether to use annuals or perennials? A well-designed garden uses both. While perennials are the backbone of your garden, annuals are a great way to experiment, maintain constant colour and energize your garden year after year.