

Way to Grow in Orinda

Painting Your Garden with a Palette of Perennials

Steve & Cathy Lambert



The gardening season is in full swing and just as birds flock to our yards, gardeners head to nurseries or home improvement stores for deals on colorful blooms and plants. Try to resist the urge to fill your cart with whatever brightly-colored, bargain annuals catch your eye, racing home to plant them in those boring, colorless spots of your yard. This approach leads to a haphazard looking landscape that, within a few short weeks is once again lacking color.

Instead of going through the process of buying flats of annuals each season, which die off and must be re-planted the next year, consider buying some longer lasting perennials for your yard. These plants will come back year after year saving you both time and money. If you can't resist a few annuals such as zinnias, impatiens and petunias, use these in your containers instead. A bright and welcoming front porch pot or hanging basket or some splashes of seasonal color scattered around your back deck or patio ought to satisfy the urge for instant color.

Perennials may cost a little more but, unlike annuals, they will grow larger and increase in value over the years. Most perennials can eventually be split and planted elsewhere, further reducing your cost for adding color to your yard.

If you aren't sure where to begin when working with perennials, here are some tips to help. Most perennials will bloom for two-to-four-months, and then take a break until the next year. While it's tempting, very tempting, to buy perennials that are already in bloom, you'll get more bloom for your buck in their first year if you buy plants that haven't flowered yet. When planting perennials, be sure to space them according to their mature size potential. This will give your plants plenty of room to grow and flourish.

Perennials offer an endlessly fascinating variety in flower color and scent as well as foliage texture, hue, shape and form. In spring, the excitement begins as plants



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Echinacea "Tiki Torch" is a perennial known for its display of bold color

emerge, often rapidly attaining their full size. This is not only a good time to plant but also to fertilize. In summer, sit back and enjoy the bounty, remembering to "deadhead" (remove the dead flower heads). Deadheading will produce more blooms because your plant will spend its energy to produce flowers instead of seeds.

Below, we've tried to present a variety of perennials with varied blooming periods to extend your garden's appeal year-round.

Agastache – Sunset Hyssop. These tough and drought resistant, mint family relatives guarantee terminal spikes adorned with brightly colored, tubular flowers just about all summer long.

Echinacea - Cone flower. Native to eastern and central U.S., Echinacea are notable for a large display of bold, daisy-like cut flowers with a large cone-shaped center.

Eucomis - Pineapple Lily. A phenomenal display from a wondrous bulb, Eucomis belongs to the Lily family and calls tropical southern Africa its home. Its bold architectural lines beg a prominent spot in your garden or in a well placed container. This Pineapple Lily prefers warm, sunny nooks with mulched, well drained soil.

Euphorbia is a huge genus of drought tolerant plants with varieties native to all temperate zones. The 'Poinsettia' is the most common Euphorbia but is not hardy enough to grow in our Orinda climate. Luckily, they don't all succumb to the cold. Our top choices include 'Fens Ruby' (a tight ground cover with tiny chartreuse flowers). This is a great plant to position at the top of rock walls as it grows nicely between the rocks.

Hemerocallis – Daylilies. Named for their individual blooms which rarely last more than one day, they make up for this short coming by offering many flowers which bloom separately and over a long period of time.

Kniphofia - Torch Lily or Red Hot Poker. Another South African native, the Red Hot Poker lives up to its name with large spikes of flowers in many warm colors. The old-fashioned orange and yellow form has survived years of neglect in abandoned gardens all over California. There are newer hybrids and species which come in versatile creamy yellows, chartreuses, soft melons and some bolder colors which while more suitable to modern planting schemes are just as hardy and reliable as their more common orange cousin.

Origanum - Ornamental Oregano. The Greeks called this ancient herb oros ganos, meaning "joy of the mountain." Legend has it, that Aphrodite created the sweet, spicy scent of its leaves as a symbol of happiness. Origanos are native to the Mediterranean, and display small but showy flowers on deciduous plants.

Rudbeckia - Black-eyed Susan. A close relative to the cone flower, the Black-eyed Susan has a similar flowering habit, but usually comes in just shades of yellow. These perennials grow from mere inches to seven feet tall with a sunflower-like bloom.

With hundreds of perennials to choose from, but limited space in our column and in most gardens, we've narrowed this list to some of our personal favorites. Some of these perennials may be harder to find, but we think they're worth the effort. We hope our recommendations will help you paint your own garden with some perennial color.

For question on this article or suggestions for a future "Way to Grow" topic please email us at office@gardenlightslandscape.com.