

# How to Plant Perennials

**Perennials** are non-woody flowering or foliage plants that do not die out each winter. Unlike **annuals**, which bloom much of the summer, perennials often bloom over a period of only two to four weeks. Their tops may or may not die back, but their roots live through the winter and send out new foliage and stalks in the spring.

Although perennials do live from year to year, they require the gardener's attention over time to thrive and grow to their potential. By choosing a combination of perennials that have different bloom times, you can achieve both an interesting display as well as continuous blooms.

## Winter Temperature

Because perennials last from year to year, the first consideration in selecting perennials is winter temperature. Follow these two tips:

- Read plant labels or catalog listings for cold hardiness information.
- Purchase plants labeled for USDA Hardiness Zone 5 (or lower). A plant that will survive winters in a particular zone is said to be hardy to that zone.

## Site

Match your plants to the intended site. Consider the soil type, moisture, exposure (north, south, east or west) and amount of sunlight and wind that the perennial bed will receive.

## What to Buy

Perennial plants shipped from mail-order nurseries may be bare-root or dormant-root plants. At nurseries or garden centers, perennial plants are usually sold in pots. Choose healthy plants with no signs of disease or pests. If possible, remove plants from their containers and examine the roots. Healthy roots should be firm and white. Avoid plants with dark-colored or tightly coiled roots. Check bare-root plants to be sure the roots have not dried out and that young shoots are not wilting.

## When to Plant

The best time to plant perennials varies from species to species. As a general rule, perennials fare better if planted in spring, late summer or early fall.

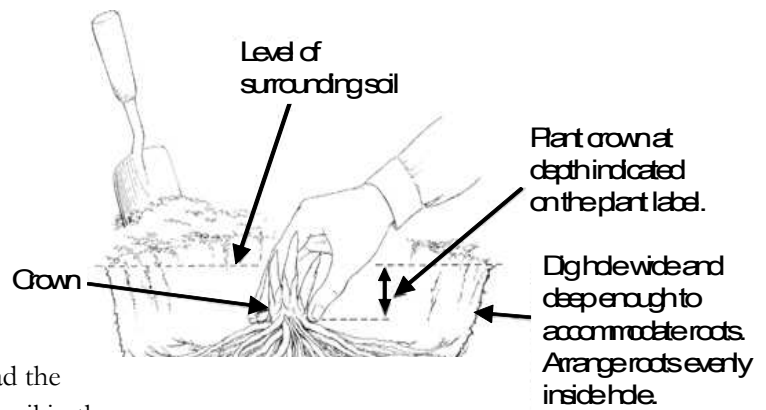
## Soil Preparation

Because perennials are in one place for several years, it is important to prepare the soil before planting. Most perennials like well-drained soil, although there are those that tolerate less than ideal sites. To improve drainage in heavy clay soils like those in Kansas, add organic matter such as compost, peat moss or rotted manure. The heavier the clay soil, the more organic matter you need to add. Work in the organic matter to a depth of at least 6 inches over the whole planting area.

## How to Plant

### Bare-root plants

1. Soak the roots for one hour to rehydrate them.
2. Space the plants as noted on the label. Give them room to spread over the next few years.
3. With bare-root plants, spread the roots on a mound of firm soil in the center of the hole, with the crown at soil level. Place the “eye” of an herbaceous peony 2 inches below ground level. Plant the rhizome of a bearded iris slightly above ground level. Proceed to Step 6 under “Potted plants”.



### Potted plants

1. Before planting, water thoroughly and let the plant drain well before removing it from the container.
2. The hole should be dug to accommodate the root ball, keeping the crown at soil level. Avoid planting too deeply. Space the plants according to the label directions, giving them room to spread over the next few years.
3. Lift the plant gently from the container.
4. Gently untangle circling roots so they can grow outward into the surrounding soil. If necessary, use pruning shears or a knife to make three to four cuts into the root ball.
5. Place the plant so the crown is at ground level and carefully backfill with the soil that was removed. *Plants placed too high can dry out. Those placed too low are subject to rot.*
6. Firm the soil around the plant and water well. A “starter” fertilizer can be applied at this time. Don’t let the soil dry out for the first week or two as the plant gets established. Thereafter, keep the plant well watered during its first season.

**Mulching.** For all perennials, both bare root and potted, apply a loose mulch of organic material around the plant, keeping it away from the stem.

**Tall perennials.** Consider staking tall perennials when they first send up growth. Push the stake into the ground near the base of the plant, taking care not to damage the roots. The stake should be two-thirds as high as the stem’s mature height.

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