



Perennial Maintenance for Beginners

BY CASS TURNBULL

DRAWINGS BY KATE ALLEN

I'm certainly no expert on perennials. About the time I was going to sign up for the perennials class at horticulture school, I started PlantAmnesty and was dragged into trees instead. Nevertheless, as a working maintenance gardener, I've spent several years knocking around in other people's perennial beds, or more accurately in their "mixed borders." (In addition to perennials, mixed borders contain shrubs, sub-shrubs, self-seeding annuals, silk flowers, lounging cats, gazing globes and anything else that might make things look better for a longer period of time.) Last year I took on a naïve client who had just acquired a new home and garden, and I realized I

could act as a coach to the very new. So, even though I don't consider myself an expert in gardening, or pruning for that matter, I may be a specialist in helping people who are new to the subject. Yeah, that's it. I'm a perpetual beginner put on earth to explain to the neophyte that which is obvious to the initiated.

What Is a Perennial?

First of all, how about a definition of "perennial"? I remember asking my mentor this question and getting a little lecture on the life cycles of perennials and annuals. What I really needed to know was that you buy



The well-clad “perennial tender” makes good use of Cass Turnbull’s line of “garden wear,” including camouflage-colored plant tie and a quiver for bamboo poles, adjustable stakes and hoops.

The perennial tender’s tool belt includes places for a tiny hammer, wire cutters, zip tie, a hand pruner and a water bottle.

annuals (things like petunias, marigolds and impatiens) in the nursery in spring, and you plant them in the ground or in pots, where they grow up in a month and bloom their heads off continually until frost, when you yank them out and throw them away. Planting your first pot of annuals is very gratifying and causes many people to get hooked on gardening.

Perennials, on the other hand, get planted and live in their beds forever, dying back to ground in the winter and returning in the spring. But they usually bloom for a short period of time—short meaning a month or two. The number of satisfactory flowering annuals seems pretty limited, but the number

of perennials is almost infinite, making perennial bed gardening more “challenging” (a term, all gardeners know, that is code for “difficult and rewarding”).

Maintaining Perennial Beds

First, you need to know that when you see that magazine photo or visit that garden—all glorious in its abundance of foliage and flowers—you are seeing it at its peak. For half of the year—winter—it’s mostly gone! And behind the scenes is an incredible amount of work—staking, grooming, relocating, staking, dividing, weeding, baiting, grooming, cutting-back and staking. Did I mention staking? But making and tending perennial beds is, after all, a horticultural addiction of the highest order.

And if you visit that same garden three years later, you will see something wholly different. I often tell people that making a garden is more like riding a horse than building a table. Gardens keep moving and changing as the plants grow up. It’s an ongoing process, not something to be finished. Beds get larger, some plants get shaded out, and the garden must be weeded, mulched and adjusted regularly. Perennial bed maintenance is more like riding wild horses at night—standing up, without saddles, while they jump fences and streams.

The old saying for perennials is, “The first year they sleep, the second year they creep and the third year they leap.” What they don’t tell you is that “the fourth year they leap, and the fifth year they leap, and the sixth...” They crowd their neighbors, shade out rhodies and conifers, and show up in the crowns of other plants or in other areas of the yard. (I’ve often thought someone should develop a sort of “Richter scale” for perennials, assigning a number to their relative aggressiveness in growth and inability to be controlled or removed.) Or, alternatively, perennials may die a slow, sickly

death. Some perennials develop holes in the center of their crowns, and some stop blooming unless you divide them. Many are slug magnets. Some have to be deadheaded, and some get mildew. Did I mention staking? Perennials need a lot of attention, generally speaking.

The good news is that most perennials are really tough. They are, in fact, the masochists of the plant world. Most want to be dug up and torn apart. They like it. You can walk all over them if you like.

Grooming

Perennials are just like people. They look great with practically no care in the spring-time of their life, but as time goes on, they require more and more care just to look good. Usually, by summer, and certainly by the fall, you will be spending a lot of time “grooming.” This is not as delicate an operation as it sounds. You might use your hedge shears to shear off the spent, brown flowers, or you might shear or cut some moth-eaten, browned-out plant to the ground, to be rewarded with a flush of bright, new, green growth and sometimes a second flowering.

When a plant starts looking tacky, just go inside it and start tugging on yellowing foliage, picking at brown stuff, raking it with your fingers. You'll be surprised how much better it looks. It's really quite gratifying. When daylilies start to lose it, I'm in there gleefully yanking on the lower foliage, tossing heaps of leaves out on the lawn. And when they get really bad, they get sawn to the ground with a bread knife! Next month, up comes a new set of foliage. The same is true with browned lady's mantle; leaf-mined, dusty columbines; ragged hardy geraniums and many others. In fact, whenever a perennial starts to brown out, including perennial bulbs, go at it with gusto. You don't



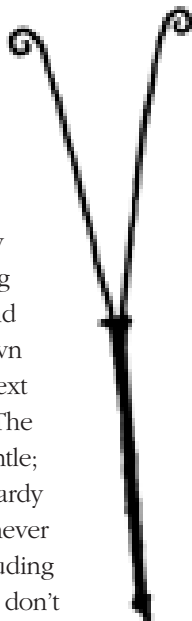
have to wait until the foliage is totally spent. They'll be fine.

Unfortunately, there are some exceptions to the “cut-it-back-at-will” rule. I wish these were listed somewhere too. So far, all I have is a mental list of the plants that, in my experience, want to be treated gently. By “gently,” I mean they need some special care when being transplanted, cut back or mulched—plants, such as peonies, Oriental and Asiatic lilies, some grasses, hellebores, epimediums, some euphorbias, penstemons, poppies, artemisias and delphiniums. I am hoping you will write to me with more, but only if your knowledge is taken from your personal experience and not from what you've read. I am certain that the list of “special needs” perennials is—relative to the total number of those used in the garden—a small one.

Books always recommend that you wait ‘til fall or winter or spring to divide and move your perennials. But by then you will have no idea what was wrong with the way things were, or where, exactly, the plants are. And it will be rainy and cold, and you will want to be inside doing other things. I like to move plants around while they are in bloom, so I can see how they look. Duh! I tend to scoff at all the correct “timing” advice I hear, until I kill something, that is. Remember, if you are not killing a few plants every year, you're not learning and growing as a gardener.

Dividing

The same is true for all that dividing of plants that you are supposed to be doing. Is it really necessary? And does dividing really help your daylily bloom? Or keep your “*Sedum spectabile* Autumn Hoorah” from flopping? Maybe, maybe not. Mostly, I find myself dividing plants



because they are getting way too huge. What I can tell you for certain is that dividing is a lot of work. Wraslin' rootballs, that's what it's all about. This past fall, after stabbing with spades—repeatedly and futilely for half an hour—the dug-up rootball of a large ornamental grass, we finally succeeded in using an axe and pry bar to split it apart. We were exhausted. And we put back less than an eighth of what we started with. Oh, and we had divided the same plant the previous year.

The best trick I ever learned from reading a magazine (with illustrations) was how to use two spading forks, adjacent to each other and back-to-back, to pry apart a root mass. After stomping or hammering the tines into the dug-up root mass, one uses the shoulders of the tools as the fulcrum point. Pushing the handles in opposite directions will magically pry the uncooperative plant apart. Wow!

I've only seen "dividing" successfully work to get plants blooming again on a couple of occasions. Once I attempted to remove an entire patch of crocosmia that the homeowner said no longer bloomed. I did what I thought was a thorough job, except that the roots of crocosmia are like a series of pop-beads that separate when you dig them up. And when I had removed 90 percent of the roots, those "corns" that had escaped had plenty of room to grow and bloom, which they did the next year. In fact, I find that some plants are impos-



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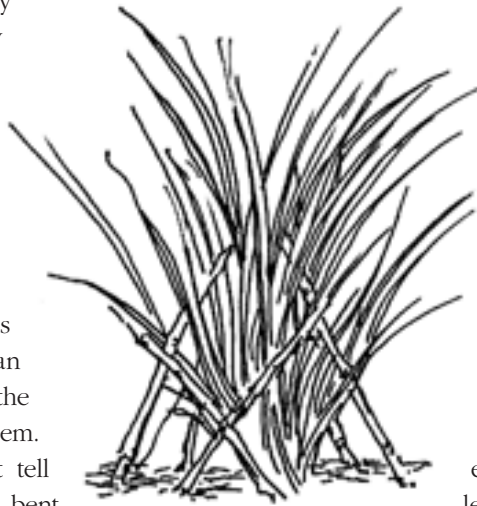
sible to remove. When I try to get rid of them, they come back, and some even increase: arums, alstromerias, scillas, acanthus, calla lilies, and lots more, I imagine. It's kind of scary, when you think about it.

Just because perennials look delicate, doesn't mean they are, and neither is the business of taking care of them. And it's dangerous! I can't tell you how many times I've bent over in a perennial bed to tickle out some covey of shot-weed and narrowly missed poking my eye out on a stake. I'm surprised there aren't more one-eyed gardeners.

Staking

Staking. It's necessary, and it's a royal pain. I'm of the opinion that well over half of the perennials commonly in use eventually flop. This means that they grow up in the spring, get flowers, and then fall over onto the ground right before the party. There's always a summer rain that flattens perennial beds all over town. When I hear that rain pelt down on a warm June night, I rest smugly knowing that the beds for which I am responsible are supremely prepared. My best advice to you is, "Stake early and stake often."

In February or March at the latest (the same time you are cutting back the sword fern and *Epimedium* foliage), get going with the hoops and cages. You have no idea how fast that clock is ticking. Of greatest need is putting the hoops over the bleeding hearts and, while you are out there, the peonies. By hoops, I mean those egregiously expensive, green, vinyl-clad, glorified tomato cages that have cross-hatching on the top. Place them over the plant early enough that the foliage will grow up and through the caging, hiding



the hoop and preventing the otherwise inevitable and heartbreaking flop in coming months. Peony cages will need to be adjusted upward or added to with more bamboo stakes or t-bars to prevent the taller stems and their heavy blooms from breaking.

Place the hoop over the crown of the newly emerging plant and push the legs down—a little hammer can come in handy to gently

tap them in. Soon you will find that one of the wimpy legs bends as it hits a tiny, buried pebble. For aesthetics sake, it may take several re-positionings to get the top level. These same legs will, in a year or two, fall off altogether. I use zip tie and green, coated electrical wire to reattach them. It is time-consuming and annoying, but I have not found better replacements. I daydream a lot about inventing a tasteful, durable, adjustable perennial hoop.

But hoops are only used for certain plants. Large, spreading, mat-type plants and single-stemmers get different treatments. I have long since given up the commonly used system of string tied between several bamboo stakes corraling, say, Shasta daisies or a clump of irises. Instead, I use a "modified, bamboo picket fence." Tying string is way too time-consuming, and the straight-up bamboo stake, as mentioned previously, is a hazard. Instead, I use a series of bamboo stakes, ends cut at a slant, and jab them in at angles. One stake goes this way and the next goes that way, crossing the first in an arrangement that looks like a series of x's. This is done around the perimeter and also randomly inside the plant. As a flower stem starts to flop, it leans up against a helpful stake, or it may even rest inside a v-crotch. I like bamboo; when I am

done, I can cut the top parts off at just the right height, hiding them from view.

This staking is best done as soon as the plant grows up, but it is also great for “remedial staking,” which is an art in itself. Once the perennial has flopped (and it happens to the best of us), the temptation is to stand it back upright and give it a straight in stake and tie. But by then the ends of the stems will have already curved upwards. When you stand that daisy straight up, its flower now faces backwards. Better just to prop the stems up halfway, using bamboo stakes pushed in at a slant. And do it in a series of layers (sort of like how beauticians foil hair). This works especially well for Siberian iris. Understaking at a slant is good for tired lady’s mantles and many other plants.

I have tried metal and plastic stakes, but I always come back to bamboo, even though it is only good for a year or two before it rots. And I have trained myself to hit the nurseries early, early, early, before all the good bamboo is gone. Good bamboo is fat and strong—not those flimsy little sticks that snap at the slightest pressure. I load up with several bags of bamboo for the season.

This leaves the single-stem type plants, like peach-leaf bellflowers, Asiatic and Oriental lilies, and the prima donnas of all perennials—delphiniums. In these cases, a single or double stake is used. If you can tell which way the spire may fall, you can use two bamboo stakes crossed in an “X,” such that the stem rests in the crotch of the crossed stakes. And garden stores now sell “Y-bar” stakes that are quite useful; these are metal stakes with stiff but malleable arms at the top. The pointed stake is stuck in the ground and its “arms” are wrapped around the perennial stem. But, like their peony cage brethren, Y-bars are also subject to bent-leg syndrome. A single bamboo stake, set straight up next to the stem, is perfectly acceptable in these situations.

And be sure to have on hand suitable tie material. Some people prefer jute, or string. I

am perfectly happy with the too-bright-green spools of twist tie that are sold for such purposes. I attach the spool to my tool belt at the beginning of the day and especially like the fact that the spool includes the cutting system. In the future I will be coming out with a line of “garden wear” that includes camouflage-colored plant tie and a quiver for bamboo poles, adjustable stakes and hoops. The “perennial tender’s” tool belt will have a place for a tiny hammer, wire cutters, zip tie, a hand pruner and a water bottle.

It is the delphinium that presents the greatest challenge to the perennial bed tender. The single stakes must be constantly adjusted upward and retied at regular intervals all along the stem. Almost overnight, it seems, the flower spikes shoot up to well beyond the last tie point. Then rain comes, or even a tiny breeze, that snaps the stems of these, the most wonderful blue flowers in all the world. You wake up to a forest of fallen blooms. Tragic! The smart gardener immediately goes out, cuts them off and brings them indoors for placement in a vase. So call an impromptu luncheon and impress your friends with your extravagant flower arrangement. Whenever you are grooming your perennial beds, remember to cut the floppers and a few others to take indoors.

The annoying chore of staking is only exceeded by the more time-consuming and annoying chore of unstaking at the end of the year. All this stuff has to be disassembled and the dead leaves combed out by the New Year. You can’t just leave it up; it would look like heck. And besides, you have to get in there and weed and mulch everything before it all starts growing again, which is happening sooner every year, or so it seems. ♡

CASS TURNBULL is the founder and spokesperson for PlantAmnesty. She is the author of “Cass Turnbull’s Guide to Pruning” (2nd edition, Sasquatch Press).