



## Annuals are Perfect Partners for Perennials

Perennial purists may scoff, but annuals deserve a place in the perennial border.

Coming into extravagant use during Victorian times, annuals found their niche as puzzle pieces in elaborate garden beds. Lined up neatly in tiers or concentric circles, early annual plantings were very formal. Their predictable growth habits and continual floral display made annuals ideally suited to these geometric designs.

Using annuals in this way in most perennial gardens today would create jarring discord. Today's perennial borders are designed to provide continual color through the skillful use of perennials with limited bloom times in combinations in a relaxed, naturalized design.

Perennial traditionalists may still choose to segregate annuals to container plantings. But if you've noticed gaps in the display of perennial color in your garden, annuals may be the solution.

Annuals can fill the space created by the disappearance of spring ephemerals or camouflage the holes that exist for those late-to-emerge perennials like hibiscus and plumbago. A beautiful annual to use in these situations is the old-fashioned favorite, Love-in-a-Mist, whose delicate flowers in soft colors cover lacy foliage. It reseeds reliably as long as the bed isn't heavily mulched.



If you've experienced the loss of some established perennials, annuals can help fill the vacancies while you take stock of your garden's new needs.

A single annual variety can be used throughout a perennial border to create a cohesive look and move a visitor through the garden. Subtlety is the key to using this technique effectively. If you choose a flashy annual, it may disrupt the flow of the design. *Verbena bonariensis* has the qualities annuals like these should have – an airy form and unobtrusive, soft-colored blooms that blend well with other plants.

Some very large annuals can serve a valuable role in the perennial border, too. They allow you to postpone decision making in a young garden. While you debate the need for

the structure of a shrub, you can experiment with the effect by planting a shrub-like annual or two. Castor beans are easy to grow and explode to 6-foot stature as summer heats up. It can illustrate the impact of a shrub at a fraction of the cost.

Using annuals artistically with perennials is easy if you remember a few things about perennials. Because the foliage-to-flower ratio of most perennials is heavily weighted in favor of foliage, perennials are usually planted in drifts of several plants to maximize their visual impact in the garden.

Many perennials have a clump-forming habit with several stems coming from a single crown. The annuals that will be most at home in the perennial border will replicate this form. You will find it easier to plant annuals in drifts if you choose those that don't suffer in close quarters.

Cosmos are cheerful, bright and floriferous and can handle tight spaces with ease. Zinnias, on the other hand, will be mildew-laden in no time if they're planted too close to their neighbors.

A few other annuals that make good perennial companions are bachelor buttons, cleome, coleus, impatiens, nicotiana, rudbeckias, and salvias.

Bachelor buttons grow well in clump plantings, provide valuable blue tones to the summer garden, and make long-lasting cut flowers.

You either love them or hate them, but the bold statue of cleome and their late-season flowering contribute dramatic impact. Be prepared to remove seedlings if you plant cleome – they reseed aggressively.

There are varieties of coleus for both sunny and shade-laden perennial gardens. Known for their beautifully colored foliage, they offer a wealth of colors so there is sure to be one perfect to combine with your perennials.

I love to use white and soft pink impatiens as companions to hostas in my shade garden. They are equally as stunning at the front edge of the garden or at the feet of a large vase-shaped hosta.



Many varieties of Nicotiana are available at your local garden center, but I prefer *Nicotiana sylvestris*. Growing four feet tall, its large leaves and white fragrant flowers make it a perfect choice for the back of the border.

There are many annual varieties of Rudbeckias that would mingle nicely with perennials. My favorites are Prairie Sun and Tiger Eye Gold. Both are especially valuable in the late summer garden.

As a group, salvias may be the most versatile of all perennial partners. In sizes from small to tall, you'll find a salvia for any spot in the border. Lady in Red, a mid-sized variety with delicate but bright flowers, is a standout in hot color schemes, and Coral Nymph brings not only soft color but also hummingbirds to the garden. And Victoria Blue offers some of the finest true blue flowers.

If you've hesitated in the past, now is the time to look to annuals as valuable problem solvers in the perennial border this summer. Remember, annuals are only a limited contract, not a life-long commitment.



*Diana Stoll is a horticulturist and the retail manager of The Planter's Palette, 28W571 Roosevelt Rd., Winfield, IL 60190. Call 630-293-1040 or visit their website at [www.planterpalette.com](http://www.planterpalette.com).*