



## Decoding the Language of Gardening

Have you ever been at a garden center and felt like you needed a translator? Do terms like biennial, slow-release and deadhead discourage you from nurturing your inner gardener? Here are some basic terms that will make you more fluent in the language of gardening.

Plants are often grouped in garden centers by their growth cycle. **Annuals** are plants that complete their life cycle in one growing season. Plants emerge from seeds in spring; they grow and flower; and they produce seeds that signal plants their life cycle is complete. The only way to save these plants from year to year is to collect their seed to be planted the next spring.

There are also a number of annuals that **reseed** themselves. Seeds drop from the plant, and new plants grow from these in spring. Morning glories, alyssum and cleome are some annuals that reseed themselves.

We sometimes refer to plants as annuals because they cannot survive our northern Illinois winters. Although we call plants like impatiens, coleus and lantana annuals, they are really **tender perennials**. Plants like these are hardy in their native area, but die in our harsher climate. Not true annuals, you can overwinter them inside.

**Perennials** are plants that continue growing from year to year. They are able to survive cold winter temperatures. Some of the plants on garden center perennial benches, however, are actually biennials.

**Biennials** complete their life cycle in two years. The plant produces green leaves the first year; it blooms, produces seed, and dies in the second year. Some hollyhocks, poppies and foxgloves are biennials. Many biennials reseed themselves so they behave the same as perennials. And if you stagger plantings, you will have flowers every year.

Plants are also grouped at garden centers according to the amount of sunlight they require. **Full sun** refers to a site that is sun-baked at least 7 to 8 hours. **Part sun** situations receive direct sunlight at least half a day. Plants that require part sun would prefer the hot, afternoon sun. **Spring sun** is the type of sun found under trees before their leaves have completely unfolded in spring. Some wildflowers and bulbs need spring sun to bloom.



**Partial shade** means half sun and at least 4 hours of shade. Plants that require partial shade prefer the gentle, morning sun and need shade in the afternoon. **Light shade** is found under tall trees with open canopies where plants receive filtered light. **Deep shade** is in dark areas of the garden.

Plants often need food to reach their blooming best. **Fertilizers** supply one or more nutrients. Just like the labels on food we purchase, fertilizers have labels with three numbers separated by dashes (10-20-10) that tell consumers about their composition. For example, 10-20-10 means 10% nitrogen, 20% phosphorus, and 10% potassium. Yes, this only equals 40%; the remaining 60% is filler added to help spread the fertilizer without burning plants. **Nitrogen** is essential for plants to grow leaves. **Phosphorus** is used by plants to produce flowers and fruit. **Potassium** is needed for root growth and the overall health of the plant.

A **balanced fertilizer** contains equal parts of nitrogen, phosphorus and potassium. A **slow-release fertilizer** has a coating that allows the fertilizer to release its nutrients gradually so they are available to plants for a longer period.

An **organic fertilizer** is derived from vegetable or animal matter like manure, blood or bone meal, seaweed and compost. A **synthetic fertilizer** is a chemical fertilizer that release nitrogen quickly into the soil.

Organic fertilizers usually require microbial activity in the soil to become available to the plant. The nutrients of synthetic fertilizers are usually released to plants with water – whether from rainfall or irrigation.

Talking about the care of your plants requires more mysterious terms. **Deadheading** is the removal of dead or faded flowers. This may be the removal of just the flower, or it might mean removing the entire stem to the base of the plant. Deadheading prolongs bloom time; may encourage a second bloom; and prevents unwanted seedlings.

**Pinching**, done with your thumb and forefinger, encourages side shoots that results in a fuller plant with more flowering stems. Mums are the perfect example of a plant that benefits from pinching. Other plants that respond to pinching include Autumn Joy sedum and yarrow.

Some plants need **cutting back**. More drastic than pinching, this technique is for perennials that grow too tall or flop. If you are a control freak, you will probably cut stems, one by one, just above a set of leaves. If you are time-starved like me, you will grab a hedge shears and make a single cut. Cutting back plants like bee balm and phlox will reduce their mature height and delay flowering by a couple of weeks.

Perennials are also cut back to the ground either in the fall or early in spring to remove the old, dead foliage. Most perennials don't care when they are cut back, but I like to leave perennials with stiff stems for winter interest.

Don't be afraid to ask questions at your local garden center. The staff is there to help you decode gardening lingo and be successful in your landscape projects.



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