Being a successful perennial matchmaker involves more than selecting flowers that might look pretty together. It’s about choosing plants that will grow well in the same conditions; that bloom at the same time (or at different times, if you’re trying to extend the show by weeks or months); and that offer variety as well as similarities in sizes, shapes, and colors. That’s a lot of information to process all at once, though, especially when you’re trying to plan an entire border.

Fortunately, you don’t need to juggle all of those details at once. A garden is made of plant groupings, groupings start with pairings, and pairings start with a single plant. When you focus first on just one perennial (one you already have in your yard, perhaps, or one that has caught your eye at your local garden center), the whole design process suddenly seems much more manageable.

Once you’ve set your sights on a perennial that needs a partner, it’s time to go into fact-finding mode: gathering key details about that plant, deciding what effect you want to create with the combination, and then coming up with a list of potential co-stars. I’m still a fan of using the old-fashioned pencil-and-paper gardening notebook for keeping track of details when I’m working out combinations. You may prefer to keep your notes on your computer, though, or in an online account where you can gather ideas and plant details, such as Pinterest.

Finding the perfect match for any perennial starts with considering all the attributes at play.

BY NANCY J. ONDRA

Facing page: The warm-hued flowers of ‘Milk Chocolate’ and ‘Nona’s Garnet Spider’ daylilies (Hemerocallis sp.) in the foreground blend well with the chartreuse foliage of Spirea thunbergii ‘Ogon’ (Mellow Yellow®) and ‘Isla Gold’ tansy (Tanacetum vulgare), and burgundy-leaved plants such as ‘Oakhurst’ pineapple lily (Eucomis comosa) and ‘Red Majestic’ contorted hazelnut (Corylus avellana). Above, Siberian irises (Iris sibirica) make pleasing partners for ‘Purple Sensation’ alliums, but adding in the taller blooms of ‘Gladiator’ allium creates a truly sensational combination.

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Take a Good Look

Let’s start with the plant features that you can see for yourself—in pictures or actually out in the garden.

Color. Flowers tend to be the first features that catch our eye, but they’re not the only sources of color. Many perennials offer colors (other than the usual range of greens) in their leaves: yellows, reds, oranges, and purples in a wide range of tints and shades, as well as striping, edging, spotting, and all sorts of other markings. You may also find unexpected colors in buds, stems, and seed heads. Make a note of all the color features your focus plant has to offer.

Leaf and flower forms. Individual leaves and flowers may have distinctive shapes that are worth considering when planning perennial partnerships. Long, narrow leaves, like those of yuccas, and long, slender flower clusters, like those on foxgloves (Digitalis spp.), have a lacy or ferny look, for instance. Leaves that are divided into many smaller lobes or leaflets, as on yarrows (Achillea spp.), have a distinctly upright, vertical habit; others may be vase-shaped, mounded, or low spreading. Pairing perennials with different habits adds interesting variety even when the plants are not in flower. It also lets you fit more plants into a given area, because you can tuck mounded plants close to the bases of upright ones or let low-spreading companions fill in around mounded partners.

Timing is another key consideration in combinations. While you can’t know to the day (or even the week) when a particular perennial is going to begin blooming each year, it’s useful to have some idea of when it’s likely to start, how long its main flowering period is going to last, and whether the plant is likely to bloom again later in the season.

Record bloomtime observations from year to year, and make a note of the date when the leaves look good, too: Do they appear early in the growing season, or do they slow to come up, not emerging until even early summer? Do they remain attractive after the plant blooms, or do they look tattered or even disappear after the flowers finish? You may also notice special seasonal changes, such as a pink, purple, or reddish leaf blush in spring, a shift from green to shades of red, purple, orange, or gold in fall, or leaves that persist through winter. Other noteworthy seasonal features beyond bloom include interesting or particularly long-lasting stems, seed heads, seeds, and berries.

Height. Obviously, if you’re hoping to pair two perennials for a spectacular flower show, they need to bloom at about the same height. Moving the leaves, and still others produce leaves and flowering stems of varying heights. That’s why some perennials can be very different heights when they’re in bloom compared to when they’re not.

Many tall perennials are available in more-compact cultivars, so if you want to use a particular perennial in a combination with a shorter companion, you may be able to find a selection to suit the purpose. It’s also possible to reduce the height of some perennials by well-timed pinching or pruning; research and note-taking are key to your success with this approach.

Habit. Habit—the overall shape of a plant when you look at it from the side—should be considered when choosing compatible companions. Some perennials, such as summer or garden phloxes (Phlox paniculata), have a distinctly upright, vertical habit; others may be vase-shaped, mounded, or low spreading. Pairing perennials with different habits adds interesting variety even when the plants are not in flower. It also lets you fit more plants into a given area, because you can tuck mounded plants in their leaves; yellows, reds, oranges, and purples in a wide range of tints and shades, as well as striping, edging, spotting, and all sorts of other markings. You may also find unexpected colors in buds, stems, and seed heads. Make a note of all the color features your focus plant has to offer.

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your yard, but until then, you’ll need to do a bit of research.

It’s useful to have at least one or two general perennial encyclopedias published within the last 10 or so years, so they’re likely to include currently available plants and up-to-date information. If you’re new to gardening in general, it’s also handy to have one or more gardening guides written specifically for your state or region. Online sources can be invaluable as well, but here, too, try to find sites that are geared toward your local growing conditions as much as possible. A catalog or website that’s based in Australia or England may be misleading if you’re gardening in Maine or New Mexico—or anywhere in between, for that matter!

Consider the site. Healthy, vigorous perennials that are filled with flowers and lush leaves are beautiful in their own right, so when you pair them with others that thrive in the same light and soil conditions, you’re practically guaranteed a gorgeous garden. Granted, plants can be surprisingly adaptable, sometimes performing respectably in much more sun or shade or wetter or drier soil than they normally prefer, depending on the specific conditions available in a particular site. As you gain experience, you can take advantage of your observations and create combinations that look great in your yard but probably wouldn’t work well elsewhere. When you’re just getting into gardening, though, or when you’re designing for a new garden or an unfamiliar site, you’ll get the best results by choosing partners with very similar light and soil preferences.

Take climate into account. Climate considerations are important. One way to judge whether particular perennials are likely to thrive in your area is by looking at their USDA Plant Hardiness Zone ratings, which are based on average minimum temperatures they can tolerate. So if you live in Zone 4, for example, you can guess that a perennial rated for Zone 6 is unlikely to survive an average winter in your area.

Of course, tolerance for cold is just one factor in determining where a plant will grow. English lavender (Lavandula angustifolia), for instance, may survive winter as far north as Zone 3 if the soil doesn’t stay wet and if there’s a thick blanket of snow to protect it from cold and wind. That same plant, however, may struggle to overwinter in a Zone 6 garden with little or no snow but ample winter rain that keeps the soil moist for months on end. That’s why you may find very different zone ratings for the same plant. Gardeners in different regions have varying experiences and take those into account when they write about their favorite plants.

You’ll notice that most references don’t give a single zone number; instead, they list a range, such as Zones 5 to 9. In this case, it means that the plant is likely to perform well as far north as Zone 5 and all the way south through Zone 9. Again, this rating tends to be subjective, since the USDA Hardiness Zone Map doesn’t take into account other aspects of climate, such as humidity, the amount and seasonal distribution of rainfall, and summer temperatures. There are maps that take one or more of these factors into account—such as the American Horticultural Society’s Plant Heat Zone Map, which provides insight into a plant’s heat tolerance—or that are customized for specific areas of the United States. However, they’re not consistently used by all references, so you may or may not be able to find this specialized information for the perennials you’re interested in. Don’t worry about that, though: Just do your best to find perennials that at least a few books or catalogs agree should be fine in your area.

GET CREATIVE

Whether you’re just starting with perennials or are a longtime gardener who wants to fine-tune your plantings for a more cohesive look, remember that the key to creating stunning plant medleys is to think like a matchmaker. Start with a favorite perennial and find it some compatible companions!