



Perennial Matchmaking 101

ARTICLE AND PHOTOGRAPHS BY NANCY J. ONDRA

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



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 one time, 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, 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 a 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 or in an on-

line account where you can gather ideas and plant details, such as Pinterest.

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.

Above: The bold forms of Persian onion (*Allium christophii*) and 'Color Guard' Adam's needle (*Yucca filamentosa*) add drama to this combination with *Coreopsis* 'Mercury Rising' and Phenomenal lavender (*Lavandula* × *intermedia* 'Niko').

Previous page: When working with similar shapes, as with *Heuchera* 'Tiramisu' and Canada wild ginger (*Asarum canadense*), add interest by varying the colors.

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, 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



Mixing perennials of different heights or habits, as in these pairings of *Salvia* 'Caradonna' with *Geranium* 'Brookside' at left and orange coneflower (*Rudbeckia fulgida*) with 'Autumn Minaret' daylily (*Hemerocallis* sp.) above, keeps similar colors from blending together.

(*Digitalis* spp.), have a decidedly spiky look, for instance. Leaves that are divided into many smaller lobes or leaflets, as on yarrows (*Achillea* spp.), have a lacy or ferny form, while leaves that are circular to oblong, as on wild gingers (*Asarum* spp.), have a rounded form. Besides spiky, some distinctive shapes among flowers and flower clusters include cupped, bell shaped, funnel to trumpet shaped, daisy form, starry, globe or ball shaped, plumes, and umbels (flat-topped to domed clusters). Contrasting forms are valuable for adding variety when you are working with a limited range of flower or foliage colors.

Season. 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 bloom-time 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 are 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. You can't have all of your combinations be the same height, of course, or you'd have a pretty boring border, but you do want the plants to be reasonably in proportion to one another.

When you take into account the height of the flowers, also look at the whole plant. Some perennials produce most of their leaves close to the ground, with their flowers on separate, taller stems. Others bloom atop the same stems that hold 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.

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 phlox (*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 close to the bases of upright ones or let low-spreading companions fill in around mounded partners.

Textural traits. Texture, in reference to the surface appearance of a plant, may be fine, medium, or bold. Many perennials have a medium texture, but some have particularly small or slender leaves and/or flowers, giving them a “fine”

A successful combination balances harmony and contrast, as in this foliage-based partnership of ‘Evergold’ sedge (*Carex oshimensis*), variegated Solomon’s seal (*Polygonatum odoratum* ‘Variegatum’), and ‘White Nancy’ deadnettle (*Lamium maculatum*).

texture: Think of ferns, for instance, or ornamental grasses. Bold perennials, such as ligularias (*Ligularia* spp.), have large, broad leaves or especially large flowers. Texture can also refer to the surface of individual leaves: whether they’re smooth (matte or glossy), rough (due to short, bristly hairs), or even fuzzy (with silky, closely packed hairs). Thinking about these aspects of texture when you choose a co-star for your focus perennial is another way to mix things up for interest beyond flowers.

DO YOUR HOMEWORK

Even potentially stunning combinations aren’t worth much if they’re not based on perennials that will actually grow in

your garden. Once you’ve been gardening for a number of years in the same place, you can often know at a glance if a given combination is likely to work in 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 or catalogs 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.

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.

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.

that take one or more of these factors into account, 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. Just do your best to find perennials that at least a few books or catalogs agree should fare well in your area.

GET CREATIVE

Whether you're just starting with perennials or are a longtime gardener who wants to fine-tune your plantings



Add excitement to any site with combinations of contrasting textures, such as hardy ice plant (*Delosperma cooperi*) and *Echeveria* 'Perle Von Nürnberg' for sun, above left, and golden Hakone grass (*Hakonechloa macra* 'Aureola') and green and gold (*Chrysogonum virginianum*) for shade, above right.

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

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

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! ■

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