

# Colour Guard

Sad to say, but mid- to late-season bloomers often get overlooked. Here's how to maintain summer colours with perennials.

BY RICHARD RIX

It's a sobering thought, but the typical Toronto garden starts to decline after the late spring/early summer period. The spring bulbs and blossoms are all spent, and the petals from such showy perennials as peonies and the larger poppies will soon lie withered among the beds, shortly to be joined by flowers from the likes of bleeding hearts and lupins.

As for the rest of summer and into fall, poor gardening practices, and perhaps lack of rain, make it harder to maintain colour and interest. That's too bad, for with some effort and thoughtfulness on our part, the garden can reward us with a cheerful dis-

play without much help from any annuals – right up to the first killing frost.

It stands to reason that all gardens should be planted with a reasonable number of mid- to late-season bloomers. The best among them include liatris, phlox (*paniculata*), rudbeckias (coneflowers and black-eyed Susans), chrysanthemums and asters. Problem is, since most of us plant perennials in springtime and desire instant gratification, late-bloomers tend to be ignored.

Certain other colourful perennials, such as the achilleas, delphinium, dianthus, evening primrose, flax, Maltese Cross (*lychnis chalcidonica*), monarda and salvia (*superba* varieties) will bridge the gap nicely between early and late summer.

Just give them some encouragement by deadheading (removing faded blooms), cultivating around them, and applying a water-soluble fertilizer rich in phosphorus at least once a month. Deadheading, in particular, can be a chore, so try to set a regular time-slot for it, say once a week. Small blooms can be pinched out by hand, but you'll need a sharp pair of cutters for the rest. You don't want to leave a lot of vacant stalks waving around, so cut at the next leaf joint.

Staking is an important job that is often required for such tall plants as delphinium and



Golden Stargazer Lily blooms mid-summer

hollyhocks, especially in windy places. When staking, don't just loop string around the plant and the stake, for it will likely slip down. Instead, tie both ends of the string to the stake. If you use bamboo poles, cover up the hole at the very top or earwigs will settle inside, right next door to their supper.

#### Thriving roses

Drought can be a problem for perennials and roses (which are actually deciduous shrubs). The average rose bush needs about five litres of water every two or three days in midsummer. Since water tends to leach away nutrients, and roses are heavy feeders, you should apply a water-soluble 5-10-5 fertilizer every second week – on top of the bone meal you jump-started your roses with in the spring.

With perennials in general, if you add enough humus to the soil (compost or peat moss) and mulch around the bases of those plants that need it, you won't have many problems with drought. If conditions are so hot and dry that you have to water your perennials more than occasionally, you should also pause in fertilizing them.

If you are applying water directly to the soil, you can do it at any time. If you use a sprinkler, don't do it in the evening (it encourages mildew and other diseases) or during the hottest part of a sunny day (it is wasteful and may cause leaf burn).



■ Hibiscus blooms mid-summer to frost.

■ Black-eyed Susan blooms mid-summer to frost.

■ Phlox blooms mid-summer to early fall.



Since chemical fertilizers can leave undesirable salts in the soil, you might occasionally like to try a “natural” fertilizer, such as compost tea. For this you will need a large piece of burlap, some string, and a large plastic container.

Fill the container about two-thirds full with water, and place as much compost as you can on the burlap, so that it can be tied up like a huge teabag and still be lifted. Drop the

“teabag” into the water, and next day you'll have a glorious “tea” for your favourite plants. Leave it for several days, if you like. You can use the waterlogged compost on the beds afterward. If you can keep the compost worms out of the bag, so much the better, for they are too valuable to drown.

Remember too that some perennials are not long lived and may enjoy only a few rewarding incarnations before having to be replaced. That's simply nature at work, not failure on your part. When should you plant perennials? In spring or early fall – it doesn't much matter which. 🌸

■ *Richard Rix gardens and writes in Toronto.*