

LOVED & LOST

**They come and go
without fanfare,
but short-lived perennials
deserve a regular
place in the garden.**

BY RICHARD RIX

It is a pity that many of the prettiest and most rewarding flowers in the garden are short-lived perennials. They prosper for a few years, and then die away, quite naturally. The pity is that we tend to forget about them once they are gone, especially when other, more enduring specimens rush in and fill their place.

Delphinium is a good example of the short-lived perennial. This rival to the rose as 'Queen of the Border' has spikes of flowers that tower majestically over most other plants, sometimes 1.5 metres high or more. Colours are generally in the blue,

white and purple range. They need staking, of course, and like roses, are heavy feeders and should not be allowed to dry out. The Pacific hybrids are among the best specimens, and the blooms endure for many weeks in early summer.

Almost at the other extreme comes *Linum Perenne*, or flax, whose delicate blooms on thin stems barely reach 30-40 cm high. Though now available with vermilion blooms, the blue version is still well worth cultivating and seems to reflect the sky. The individual flowers on this summer bloomer don't last long but are so prolific that it doesn't matter. It will grow well in a poor, dryish soil, and can be cut back a few

**Left: Delphinium. Right: Lupins.
Far right: Foxglove. Illustration: Wallflower.**

Photos courtesy: Garden Flowers, Salamander Books Ltd., and Spring Garden



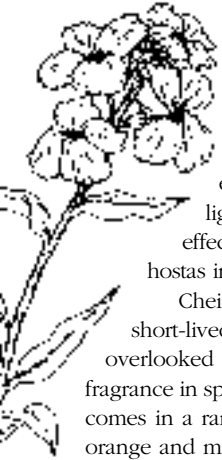
inches after peak blooming to encourage a later display.

Hollyhocks are worthy of consideration, too, especially in a sunny spot against a wall or a fence. As tall as delphinium, they come in a broader range of colours, though some of those colours can be pallid and hard to predict. In a favourable spot, hollyhocks will prosper for several years but will one day disappear without warning, through no fault of your own.

Some biennials are short-lived too, fading to oblivion after blooming once or twice. Like perennials, in milder climates they survive as a species by self-seeding, though this rarely happens in southern Ontario. In this category is foxglove, another tall plant that does well in light shade and looks most effective when planted among hostas in a woodland setting.

Cheiranthus, or wallflower, is a short-lived perennial that is much overlooked for Toronto gardens, yet its fragrance in spring sunshine is delightful. It comes in a range of colours from gold to orange and magenta to crimson. Compact and bushy, it prefers full sun and a sheltered spot. Even if it manages to winter over, it deteriorates quite rapidly and is best planted afresh each year anyway.

Lupins, especially the Russell strain, are well worth trying because their tall, multi-flowered spikes attract butterflies, birds and bees. Try to plant them at the back of the border, since they look untidy once flowering is over. They may not do well if planted too close to a house wall, for they don't like the lime that can leach from the brick-



work into the soil.

Gaillardia aristata is a fun plant with a long flowering season from mid- to late-summer. Who can resist a plant whose nickname is “goblin” and that creates a dense blanket of orange, daisy-like blooms in any well-drained, sunny spot where you care to locate it? Even if you can persuade it to winter over, you will get better results by taking root cuttings in the fall and keeping them in sandy soil in a cool but frost-free location before planting them out early the following spring.

The Geum hybrids tend to come and go without a trace after a few seasons, but while they are with us they flower in prolific leafy clumps up to 60 cm high, in bold reds, oranges and yellows. Very easy to grow, all they ask for is a sunny spot and occasional relief in time of drought. An old favourite is Mrs. Bradshaw, whose orangey-red blooms (somewhat like annual dahlias) bring a welcome splash of colour to the middle of the border.

Nobody has to describe for you what an oriental poppy looks like, with its large careless blooms and enormous seedheads. Just be sure to plant it where something larger can conceal it once it finishes flowering, for it withers in a miserable way. A good companion plant is the tuberous begonia (not a short-lived perennial), due to its fast growth from early summer on.

The tickseed group, more formally known as Coreopsis, offers some brilliant yellow blooms atop mid-height willowy stems, with a long flowering season, providing it is kept from drying out and dead-headed regularly. Strictly speaking, it is not a short-lived perennial but is treated as an

annual in our climate, since it often fails to winter over. However, since a clump of my own did make it through this last, mild winter, I feel justified in including it in the category.



Richard Rix

Finally, don't forget the broad dianthus group that includes carnations, sweet William, garden pinks and maiden pinks. Carnations aside, they are all easy and rewarding, often with a clove-like fragrance that intensifies in the sun.



Sweet William

Carnations are the prettiest and showiest of the dianthus blooms but don't do well in the kind of hot dry summers we have experienced lately.

By the way, the cultivation of short-lived perennials is one of the many reasons why you should keep a garden journal: it will help keep the memory fresh and remind you to plant them again ... and again. 🌸

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DID YOU HEAR...?

- A 12-oz (350 ml) cola contains the equivalent of 10 teaspoons of sugar and 150 calories. One can a day of pop could add 15 lb a year to your weight through extra calories.
- On average, men spend anywhere from 48 minutes to one-and-a-half hours a day commuting to and from work.

