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Starting a Perennial Garden

A perennial is a plant that comes back year after year, from the ground up. Choose plants that are hardy to our zone (Zone 6 for Niantic). They come in all kinds of shapes and sizes, and require all sorts of different growing conditions. (Sun/Shade - Moist/Dry) Once you have determined the type of growing condition that you have, you're ready to start.

The most important part of gardening is soil preparation. This is also the hardest, and the least fun. Eliminate all weeds from your garden bed. Have your soil tested to determine what amendments are needed. At the very least, be sure to add a good layer of nice organic material (compost, manure, and peat moss are examples). A good rule of thumb is to add 2 to 4 inches of organic matter to your garden and till or hand dig it all in. Perennials will be there for a long time - it's best to give them a good home right from the beginning.

Choose a healthy looking plant. Although most people go for the plant that's in full bloom, you will actually get a longer bloom period if you choose a plant with buds. Be sure that there are no visible signs of bugs or disease. Try to get it planted as soon as possible, but if you can't get it into the garden right away, please be sure to keep it well watered.

Remove the plant from the pot and take a good look at the roots. Are they all tangled and circling the pot? If so, be sure to pull the root mass apart and spread the roots out. Use a knife to cut into the root mass if needed. The roots will rapidly grow and establish themselves in the nice fertile soil that you prepared for it. Dig a hole the same depth as the pot, gently place the perennial in the soil and fill the hole in with some more of that nice rich soil. Gently tap the soil around the plant and water well. After a thorough watering, see if you need to add more soil around the plant to bring the level of the soil to where it was in the pot.

Mulching helps the plant's roots stay moist as well as reducing the number of weeds. Use organic based mulch for perennials. There are lots to choose from. Compost, cedar mulch, or pine nuggets are just a few options that we offer. The choice is up to you. Be sure not to mulch right up to the plant - you don't want to bury the stem. Watering frequency depends on a lot of variables. Be sure to check newly planted gardens for any sign of wilting. Perennials that are planted in the summer are going to need more frequent watering than those planted in spring or fall. A good soaking a couple of times a week is more beneficial than light watering every day. Placing a soaker hose in the garden before mulching will save you hours of work as well as gallons of water. You want to train the roots to grow deep into the garden to seek out water. Deep roots will help perennials make it through any drought (or vacation that you might take during the summer).

Fertilizing is not as crucial, as it is with flowering annuals. A light application of 5-10-5 fertilizer in the spring is generally sufficient. Hand weeding is probably the most effective means of weed control. Deadheading encourages repeat blooms. Some perennials need to be cut back after bloom. Taller perennials should be staked. Powdery mildew is probably the most common fungal disease that hits the gardens during our muggy summer days. There are great products to help control this. Overcrowding your garden and not leaving any space for air circulation probably encourages mildew spread.

Perennials can be divided every 3 or 4 years. Fall or spring clean up is important to tidy up the look of the plant as well as eliminate any diseased portion of the plant.