

Gardening with Perennials in Florida¹

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This publication is intended for home gardeners and landscape professionals interested in herbaceous perennials that beautify Florida landscapes (Figure 1). Once established, perennials typically require less maintenance than annuals and have the advantage of being a more permanent part of the landscape.

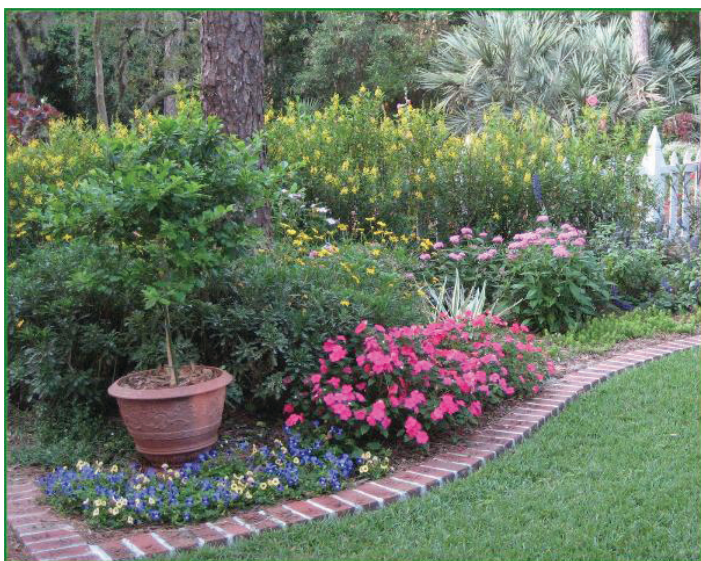


Figure 1. A cottage garden of perennials and annuals.
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Perennials are plants that grow indefinitely. The shrubs and trees that comprise our landscapes are perennials, but these are referred to as woody perennials. The plants discussed here are herbaceous perennials—plants with little or no woody tissue. However, under the continuous growing conditions of South Florida, some herbaceous perennials become woody shrubs. Likewise, plants that are normally

woody shrubs in South Florida behave as herbaceous perennials in North Florida, where they are killed to the ground each winter. Plants that grow from bulbs, corms, tubers, or other types of underground storage systems are also herbaceous perennials.

Selection and Use

The perennials listed in Table 1 are good performers in Florida gardens or in containers. Many other perennials exist, but they may not be suited to Florida's climate and soils.

Some perennials are used to best advantage when they are planted in masses (Figure 2). The bold displays of color they provide are much more pleasing than individual plants placed here and there. Evergreen and flowering shrubs provide an attractive backdrop for masses of small perennials, whereas large-growing perennials can be used as specimen plants.

Note the mature size of each perennial you select. Most large-growing perennials can be maintained as a smaller plant, but it may require frequent pruning to keep them that way. Is the perennial tender or hardy to cold? Tender perennials need cold protection during frosts or freezes; some dieback and return from the roots. How much sunlight does it require? When does it flower? Ideally, a garden should have a succession of blooms throughout the year.

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Figure 2. Bulbine massed in bed.

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When designing a bed, think of plant form and texture (Figure 3). Pleasing foliage combinations (clumping with upright forms; delicate with bold textures) give the garden interest long after the flowers are gone.



Figure 3. The bold foliage of leopard plant provides an interesting contrast with other leaf textures.

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Flower and foliage color is another important design consideration. “Warm” colors, such as orange, red, and yellow, should be grouped together and segregated from “cool” hues and pastels. White, blue, silver/gray, and green go with everything and can be used as transition colors in the garden (Figure 4). Repetition of color and form pulls the eye through the garden and provides a pleasing cohesiveness.

Consider all these factors when determining how and where plants should be used in the landscape or perennial garden. Inexperienced perennial growers may find it

challenging to design a garden. Luckily, most perennials transplant easily, and beds can be rearranged if needed.



Figure 4. The white flowers and bracts of ‘Diamond Frost’ *Euphorbia* provide a nice transition.

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Planting and Care

The most important step in establishing perennials is preparing the planting bed. Because most perennials remain in the ground for several years without being divided or moved, proper soil preparation is essential.

Sandy soils should be amended with organic matter, such as manure, peat, or compost. Apply several inches of organic matter to the soil surface and work it into the top 10 to 12 inches. A soil pH of 5.5 to 6.5 is recommended. Many UF/IFAS Extension offices test soil and make pH recommendations or soil samples can be sent to the UF/IFAS Soil Testing Lab in Gainesville (https://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/entity/topic/home_soil_testing).

Space the plants in the bed to allow for their future growth and for cultivation between them. Plant them so that the top of the root ball is slightly above the soil surface. Mulch heavily, at least 2 to 3 inches, with an organic mulch, such as leaves, pine straw, or wood chips. A thick mulch conserves moisture, insulates roots from heat and cold, and discourages weeds. Do not allow the mulch to touch the base of the plants and reapply it as needed.

Most perennials require little maintenance other than occasional pruning and fertilizing. Timing of fertilizer applications and amounts may vary with different plants and parts of the state. Let the appearance and growth rate

of the plant guide you. Many perennials require little or no fertilizer once established; others benefit from one to four light applications of fertilizer per growing season. A general purpose landscape fertilizer containing equal amounts of nitrogen and potassium and low to no phosphorus (such as 15-0-15) is recommended. Controlled-release fertilizers, such as Osmocote®, Dynamite®, and other products, release nutrients slowly over time and can provide excellent results. Occasional pruning may be needed to remove dead flower spikes or unsightly leaves, or to reduce the size of the plant (Figure 5). Some perennials become top-heavy when in bloom and need to be staked.



Figure 5. Pruning spent flowers (deadheading) keeps perennials blooming.

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Propagation

The propagation method for each perennial is listed in Table 1. Division is the quickest and easiest method of multiplying some clumping perennials. Simply dig the plants and shake off the soil. It will be apparent where to separate the plants into smaller units having roots and leaves. The best time to divide plants is after the blooming season or during milder times of the year. Perennials that are frozen back to the ground can be lifted, divided, and reset at that time with good results. Some perennials are easily grown from seed or cuttings as well. Spring and summer are the appropriate seasons for these forms of propagation.

Pests and Diseases

Although the plants listed here are relatively pest free, perennials should be inspected frequently for insects and diseases. If pests are detected early enough, they can be managed before much damage occurs. Many pest problems can be eliminated by simply hand-picking the insects or

infected leaves. For severe infestations, chemical control may be needed.

Perennials can also be damaged by microscopic, worm-like parasites called nematodes which live in soil and feed on plant roots. Severely infested beds should be treated and replanted with new plants. For information on nematodes, insects, and diseases, contact your local UF/IFAS Extension office: <https://sfyl.ifas.ufl.edu/find-your-local-office/>.

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Reference

Park Brown, S., and R. Schoellhorn. 2006. *Your Florida Guide to Perennials*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida.

Table 1. Useful information for selecting and growing perennials in Florida.

Name	Zones	Growthhabit	Common height	Flowercolor/ Season	Light conditions	Soil type	Salt-spray tolerant	Cold hardy*	Method of propagation	Use/Comments
African Iris (<i>Diets grandiflora</i>)	N, C, S	Clumping	3'	White, yellow/ Year-round	Sun, light shade	Wide range, drought tolerant	No	Hardy	Division	Background, bedding.
Beach Sunflower (<i>Helianthus debilis</i>)	C, S	Groundcover	6-10"	Yellow/Year-round	Sun	Well drained, wide range, very drought tolerant	Yes	Tender	Cuttings	Groundcover, wildflower garden, attracts butterflies. Florida native. Usually behaves as a reseeding annual in north Florida.
Begonia (<i>Begonia</i> sp.)	N, C, S	Upright, rounded, or groundcover	Varies	White, pinks, reds Winter, spring, some year-round	Light to full shade	Moist, organic	No	Tender	Stem or leaf cuttings, division	Versatile and dependable in the shade garden best in Central to South Florida. Good performers include 'Cane,' 'Angel Wing,' and rhizomatous types (other than 'Rex'). For more information see: A Beginner's Guide to Begonias .
Blackberry Lily (<i>Iris domestica</i>) (syn. <i>Belamcanda chinensis</i>)	N, C, S	Upright	3'	Orange-red/ June-October	Sun	Wide range, drought tolerant	No	Hardy	Division, seed	Background, massing. Iris-like foliage.
Black-eyed Susan (<i>Rudbeckia hirta</i>)	N, C, S	Rounded, clumping	12"-24"	Yellow/Spring - fall Blue/Year-round	Sun	Well-drained	Low	Tender	Seed, division, cuttings	Use in mixed wildflower beds. Self-seeds. Good nectar source for butterflies and bees.
Blue Daze (<i>Evolvulus glomeratus</i>)	N, C, S	Spreading	1-2'	Blue/Year-round	Sun	Wide range	Yes	Tender	Cuttings	Mass plantings, groundcover. Often suffers from a leaf fungal disease in summer. May not survive a hard freeze in North FL.
Blue Sage (<i>Eranthemum pulchellum</i>)	C, S		3-5'	Deep blue/ Winter	Light to full shade	Well-drained	Yes	Tender	Cuttings	Background, massing. Prune back after flowering.
Bulbine (<i>Bulbine frutescens</i>)	C, S	Clumping	1-2'	Orange, yellow/Spring, summer	Sun to light shade	Well drained, drought tolerant	Yes	Hardy	Division, seed	Groundcover, container. 'Hallmark' is a sterile cultivar. May behave as a perennial in some areas of north Florida.

Name	Zones	Growthhabit	Common height	Flowercolor/ Season	Light conditions	Soil type	Salt-spray tolerant	Cold hardy*	Method of propagation	Use/Comments
Bush Daisy, African Bush Daisy (<i>Euryops pectinatus</i>)	C, S	Erect, bushy	2-3'	Yellow/Spring, summer, fall	Sun to light shade	Well drained, wide range	Yes	Semihardy	Cuttings	Massing, mid-border, attracts butterflies. Somewhat drought tolerant.
Cat's Whiskers (<i>Orthosiphon aristatus</i>)	C, S	Upright	2-3'	White, pale lavender/Year- round	Sun to light shade	Moist, fertile, organic	No	Tender	Cuttings	Midborder, accent plant, attracts butterflies/ hummingbirds.
Chrysanthemum, Garden Mum (<i>Chrysanthemum x moifolium</i>)	N, C	Spreading	1-2'	Many colors/ Fall-spring	Sun	Fertile, well drained	No	Hardy	Cuttings, division	Bedding. Pinch once or twice until August 15 to induce branching.
Cigar Flower (<i>Cuphea micropetala</i>)	N, C	Upright	3-4'	Yellow, orange/Fall	Sun	Drought tolerant	No	Tender	Cuttings	Bedding, attracts hummingbirds.
Daylily (<i>Hemerocallis</i> sp.)	N, C, S	Clumping	1-3'	Many colors/ March-June	Sun, shifting shade	Wide range, drought tolerant	Yes	Semihardy	Division, seed	Background, border plantings, massing.
Baby's Breath Euphorbia (<i>Euphorbia hypericifolia</i>)	C, S	Spreading	1-3'	White/Nearly year-round	Sun	Wide range, drought tolerant	No	Semihardy	Cuttings	Produces clouds of airy white flowers nearly year- round. A low-maintenance and heat-tolerant plant. Short-lived (3 years) in North Florida. Cultivars include 'Diamond Frost', 'Hip Hop', 'Breathless', White Manaus' and others.
Firecracker Plant, Coral Plant (<i>Russelia equisetiformis</i>)	C, S	Rounded/ weeping	3'	Red, pale yellow, coral/ Year-round	Sun to light shade	Well drained, somewhat drought tolerant	Yes	Tender	Division, tip cuttings	Massing, accent plant, container, attracts butterflies/ hummingbirds. <i>R. sarmientosa</i> is another nice garden perennial with red flowers.
Firespike (<i>Odontonema</i> sp.)	N, C, S	Upright	6'	Red/lavender/ magenta Varies by species	Sun to light shade	Fertile, well- drained	No	Tender	Cuttings, division	Background. Attracts hummingbirds/ butterflies. <i>Odontonema cuspidatum</i> , the red- flowered form blooms in the fall; <i>O. callistachyum</i> (lavender or magenta) blooms January-March.

Name	Zones	Growthhabit	Common height	Flowercolor/ Season	Light conditions	Soil type	Salt-spray tolerant	Cold hardy*	Method of propagation	Use/Comments
Flax Lily (<i>Dianella tasmanica</i> 'Variegata')	N, C, S	Clumping	1-2'	Small blue/ Winter, spring	Sun or shade	Moist, well drained	Unknown	Hardy	Division	Grown for its attractive, variegated, iris-like foliage. Groundcover, specimen, or container. May reseed. Tends to develop scale insect problems in shade.
Gaura (<i>Gaura lindheimeri</i>)	N, C	Clumping	2-4'	White or pink/ Year-round	Sun	Well drained, drought tolerant	No	Tender	Cuttings, seed	Massing.
Gerbera Daisy (<i>Gerbera jamesonii</i>)	N, C, S	Clumping	12-18"	Many colors/ Year-round	Sun to light shade	Fertile, well drained	Yes	Tender	Division, seed	Bedding, cut flower. Keep crowns above ground. Marginal in South FL.
Golden Shrimp Plant (<i>Pachystachys lutea</i>)	C, S	Upright	3-4'	Yellow/Warm months	Light to deep shade	Wide range	No	Tender	Cuttings	Background.
Heliotrope, Scorpion Tail, or Butterfly Heliotrope (<i>Heliotropium angiospermum</i>)	C, S	Rounded	3'	White/Year-round	Sun to light shade	Drought and flood tolerant	No	Tender	Cuttings, seed	Mid-border, transition plant, wildflower garden, attracts butterflies. Florida native.
Jacobinia (<i>Justicia carnea</i>)	N, C, S	Erect, bushy	2-4'	Rose, white/ Warm months	Light to full shade	Fertile, moist	No	Tender	Cuttings	Background, massing. Frequently remove old blooms. Numerous tropical perennials can be found in the genus <i>Justicia</i> , including <i>J. leonardii</i> and <i>J. brandegeana</i> listed below.
Jewels of Opar (<i>Talinum paniculatum</i> 'Variegata')	C, S	Rounded to upright	3'	Pink/Summer	Light to deep shade	Rich, moist	Unknown	Tender	Cuttings	Mid-border, massing. A green form of this plant is sold in the trade, but can reseed and become very weedy.

Name	Zones	Growthhabit	Common height	Flowercolor/ Season	Light conditions	Soil type	Salt-spray tolerant	Cold hardy*	Method of propagation	Use/Comments
Lantana (<i>Lantana</i> sp.)	N, C, S	Groundcover, rounded, upright	Varies	Red, pink, orange, yellow, white/Warm months	Sun	Well drained, wide range, very drought tolerant	Yes	Tender	Cuttings	Massing, groundcover (depending on type); attracts butterflies/hummingbirds. Native species exist. Plant only sterile varieties; non-sterile cultivars are considered invasive throughout Florida and are not recommended. For approved cultivars see: Assessments - UF/IFAS Assessment - University of Florida , Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences (ufl.edu).
Leopard Plant (<i>Farfugium japonicum</i>)	N, C, S	Groundcover	2'	Yellow/Fall, winter	Light shade	Rich, moist	Unknown	Hardy	Division	Groundcover, container. Some cultivars have cream or yellow leaf markings.
Lily of the Nile (<i>Agapanthus</i> sp.)	N, C	Clumping	2-3'	Blue, lavender, white/ Summer, early fall	Sun to light shade	Fertile, well drained	Yes	Semihardy	Division, seed	Massing, mid-border, cut flowers.
Lion's Ear (<i>Leonotis leonurus</i>)	N, C, S	Upright	4-5'	Orange/fall-spring	Sun	Well drained	Yes	Tender	Cuttings	Background. Prune to keep plant bushy.
Marble Leaf (<i>Dicliptera undulata</i> 'Aureovariegata')	C, S	Groundcover	1'	Lavender/ winter	Sun to light shade	Well drained	Unknown	Tender	Cuttings	Groundcover.
Mexican Heather (<i>Cuphea hyssopifolia</i>)	N, C, S	Dwarf shrub	18"	Purple, rose, or white/ Year-round	Sun to light shade	Well drained	No	Tender	Cuttings	Massing, edging, groundcover. Prune frequently.
Orange Justicia (<i>Justicia leonardii</i>)	N, C, S	Rounded shrub	4'+	Orange/warm months	Sun to part shade	Well drained, wide range	Yes	Hardy	Cuttings	Hardy, low maintenance. Prune to 3'. Attracts hummingbirds and butterflies. Often confused with <i>Dicliptera squarrosa</i> , Hummingbird Plant, which is shorter, has fuzzy, gray-green leaves and is not as cold-hardy or as shade tolerant.

Name	Zones	Growthhabit	Common height	Flowercolor/ Season	Light conditions	Soil type	Salt-spray tolerant	Cold hardy*	Method of propagation	Use/Comments
Ornamental Sweet Potato (<i>Ipomoea batatas</i>)	N, C, S	Groundcover	6-12"		Sun	Well drained, wide range	Unknown	Tender	Cuttings	Groundcover (seasonal), container. Vigorous plants grown for their attractive foliage. Chartreuse, purple-black, variegated, and copper-colored cultivars exist. Compact cultivars now available.
Peacock Ginger (<i>Kaempferia</i> sp.)	N, C, S	Groundcover	6-36"	Lavender, white/Spring, summer	Light to full shade	Wide range, prefers enriched soil	No	Hardy	Division, seed	Groundcover. Hosta replacement. Dormant in winter (except in South FL).
Pentas (<i>Pentas lanceolata</i>)	N, C, S	Rounded to sprawling shrub	4'	Red, pink, white, lilac/ Year-round	Sun to light shade	Well drained, drought tolerant	No	Tender	Cuttings	Background plantings, cut flower. Attracts butterflies. May be killed completely during very cold winters.
Persian (<i>Strobilanthes auriculata</i> var. <i>dyeriana</i>)	C, S	Rounded	4'	Pale blue/ Winter	Light to full shade	Wide range	Yes	Tender	Cuttings	Mid-border, massing, accent plant. Winter blooms are unattractive; prune back plants at this time.
Philippine Violet (<i>Barleria cristata</i>)	N, C, S	Upright	4'	Lavender, white/ October-April	Sun to light shade	Wide range	No	Tender	Cuttings	Background. Reseeds and may become weedy in the garden. <i>B.</i>
Plectranthus (<i>Plectranthus</i> sp.)	C, S	Rounded, upright, or groundcover	Varies	White, purple, pink/Summer, fall, or intermittent	Sun to light shade	Rich, organic, moist	No	Semihardy	Cuttings	Front or mid-border, groundcover, container. Many are grown solely for their attractive variegated or silver foliage.
Porterweed (<i>Stachytarpheta</i> sp.)	C, S	Upright	Varies	Blues, coral, red, purple/ Warm months	Sun to light shade	Well drained, drought tolerant	Yes	Tender	Cuttings	Massing or accent plant, attracts butterflies/hummingbirds. May reseed. <i>S. cayennensis</i> may escape cultivation. <i>S. jamaicensis</i> is a FL native.
Purple Coneflower (<i>Echinacea purpurea</i>)	N,C,S	Clumping	3'	Lavender/ Spring to Fall	Full sun/part shade	Well drained, drought tolerant	No	Hardy	Seeds, division	Flower beds, wildflower gardens; cut flower. Native. Attracts bees and butterflies. Remove old flowers to extend bloom period. Various flower colors exist.

Name	Zones	Growthhabit	Common height	Flowercolor/ Season	Light conditions	Soil type	Salt-spray tolerant	Cold hardy*	Method of propagation	Use/Comments
Ruellia (<i>Ruellia simplex</i>)	N, C, S	Varies, clumping to upright	2-3'	Blue, violet, red, pink/ May-November	Sun to light shade	Well drained, drought tolerant	Yes	Semihardy	Cuttings, seed	Background, bedding. 'Purple Showers' Mexican petunia is a sterile cultivar of <i>R. simplex</i> that does not reseed. The University of Florida/ IFAS has released infertile cultivars such as the 'Mayan' series. <i>Ruellia simplex</i> should be managed to prevent escape my vegetative spread.
Salvias, Sages (<i>Salvia</i> sp.)	N, C, S	Upright, bushy	2-5'	Blues, red, pink, yellow, white/ Species dependent	Sun	Well drained, drought tolerant	Generally no	Variable by species	Division, cuttings	Background, massing. Many species exist.
Sanchezia (<i>Sanchezia nobilis</i>)	C, S	Upright	3-8'	Yellow/ Summer	Sun, shade	Rich, well drained	Yes	Tender	Cuttings	Back of border, massing, accent plant, container.
Shrimp Plant (<i>Justicia brandegeana</i>)	N, C, S	Sprawling	4-6'	Reddish-brown and other colors/ Spring, summer	Sun to light shade	Wide range	No	Tender	Cuttings, division	Mass plantings, background. Attracts hummingbirds. 'Flava' (yellow), 'Jambalaya' (red), and 'Fruit Cocktail' (chartreuse and pink) are popular cultivars.
St. Bernard's Lily (<i>Anthericum liliago</i>)	N, C, S	Upright, clumping	2'	White/Year-round	Sun, shade	Moist, well drained	Unknown	Hardy	Division, seed	Mixed or mass plantings, container, specimen.
Stoke's Aster (<i>Stokesia laevis</i>)	N, C	Groundcover	8"	Lavender to whitish/Late spring	Full sun	Moist, rich, acid	No	Hardy	Division, seed	Mass plantings. Native wildflower; attracts butterflies; Flowers held on 1-2 ft tall stems.
Toad Lily (<i>Tricyrtis asiocarpa</i>)	N, C	Upright, clumping	3'	White and amethyst Summer-fall	Light shade	Prefer moisture	No	Hardy	Seed, cuttings, division	Forms attractive mounds of speckled foliage; small orchid-like flowers are held on archings stems.
Trailing Wishbone Flower (<i>Torenia</i> hybrids)	C, S	Groundcover	3-6"	Deep blue, purple, pink, white/Warm months	Light to full shade	Fertile, moist, well drained	No	Tender	Cuttings, seed	Back of border, accent plant, attracts hummingbirds. Very tolerant of heat and humidity. Performs as an annual in north Florida.

Name	Zones	Growthhabit	Common height	Flowercolor/ Season	Light conditions	Soil type	Salt-spray tolerant	Cold hardy*	Method of propagation	Use/Comments
Verbena (<i>Verbena</i> sp. and hybrids)	N, C, S	Sprawling	6-8"	Red, pink, white, lavender/ March-October	Sun	Fertile, drought tolerant	No	Semihardy	Cuttings, seed	Massing, groundcover. 'Sissinghurst', a rose-pink cultivar, appears to be reliable in South FL.
Yellow Alder (<i>Turnera ulmifolia</i>)	C, S	Upright	2'	Yellow or cream/Year-round	Sun	Wide range	No	Tender	Cuttings	Attracts butterflies.
Walking Iris (<i>Neomarica</i> sp.)	N, C, S	Upright, mounding	2-3'	White, blue, or yellow/Spring, summer, fall	Light to full shade	Wide range	No	Tender	Division	<i>Neomarica caerulea</i> is white and purple. The cultivar 'Regina' has handsome 4' tall leaves and blue-purple flowers; <i>N. longifolia</i> has yellow petals with brown markings.
*Hardy—Frost and freeze hardy. Semi-hardy—Some plant damage from frost or freeze. Tender—Plant is killed to the ground by frost or freeze, but recovers quickly.										