

# Northwind

PERENNIAL FARM

## COMING TO KNOW PERENNIALS

Here are some questions you need to ask and have answers to so you can understand and use perennials in a creative, thoughtful and knowing way.

- \* What is the plants growth habit? Is it clump-forming, or does it spread by rhizomes? Does it grow quickly or slowly? How tall and wide does it get?
- \* What's the plants structure? Is it vertical or mounded; arching or creeping? Combining plants with similar growth habits may cause some to start out-competing their neighbors. Alternatively, interplanting low-growing creepers with vertical plants can create a mutually beneficial system.
- \* What are the plant's ornamental features? When does it flower and for how long? How does the foliage develop and change throughout the year? Does the plant have fall or winter interest?
- \* When, how and why will pruning affect plant height, bloom time, re-blooming or a flush of new foliage?
- \* How often -- at what time of year -- should the plant be divided to maintain its vigor?

## PATTERNS





# SHAPES *make the* GARDEN

In the first of a six part series, the author introduces the broad range of shapes that can be used to create exciting and lasting pictures. Christopher Lloyd

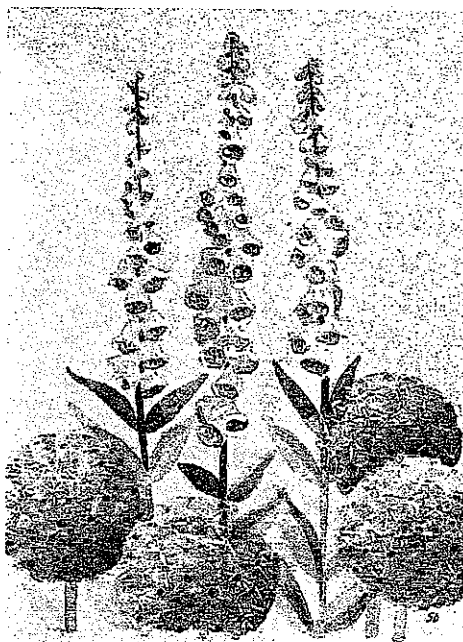
WHEN WE LOOK at a plant, what strikes us first? Maybe its blinding color or the overwhelming scent that it gives off. Maybe its texture; about a particular flower we'll be told, "It lasts only for a few hours," which immediately makes us want to touch it and sense its fragility and evanescence through our fingers (even if that fondling destroys it!).

But the shape of a plant and how that shape relates to its surroundings are as important as any of its other qualities. If we are interested in trees, we will come to recognize and be able to identify them by shape, from a distance, covered in foliage or in winter nakedness. In this way, a landscape takes on new meaning and life for us.

Similarly, if we are scrambling about among rocks at a high altitude, where the ground is no doubt covered with deep snow in winter and seems, from a distance,

to be barren even in summer, we will suddenly come upon a dense living cushion, snuggled into a crevice, an androsaceae, maybe, or a draba, and we are startled that

**Spikes and spires such as foxgloves are visually uplifting, while globes like alliums and boxwoods are anchors.**



such a plant actually prefers, indeed needs, such a habitat for its continued existence in the wild. And it is shaped to withstand the worst that the elements can bombard it with.

Between the extremes, there are all kinds of shapes around us that, under the necessarily artificial circumstances of a garden, we can manipulate and play around with so as to create satisfying pictures. For we must always remember that as well as being a craft, gardening is also an art, albeit vulnerable to change. We can be proud of that.

Among the strongest shapes in plants are **spikes and spires** reaching boldly upward. They may be trees, which will be used as accents, but may be graded down-

ward in size to something quite tiny, like *Persicaria vacciniifolia*, a mat-forming plant from wet, rocky areas in the Himalayas. Its little flower spikes, innumerable in number, all point upward.

Large or small, plants of this shape are reaching for the sky. "We may be earthbound," they are saying, "but the sky's our real home," and just to see them gives us a spiritual lift too.

**Globes and domes** are no less important. They make a virtue of being earthbound; there is always a sense of completion in a circle. Globes are anchors. This is the reason that boxwood balls are such a popular shape of this plant. "Go off on your questing," they tell the spires. "It's here and now that matters." And they need not be so earthbound. The globes of alliums hover at various levels, over and through a border.

**Flatheads and tiers** continue the argument in a horizontal direction, the opposite of verticals. They have an air of settled strength. The plateau is somewhere you can rest. So we often site the flatheads near the spires. The horizontal motif is repeated in some plants whose branching is repeated to form tiers at various levels. The whorled foliage of *Lilium martagon* rises in tiers. So do the branches of the two striking dogwoods *Cornus alternifolia* and *C. controversa*.

**Weepers and fountains** contribute grace and a sense of relaxation. They need a bit of upward thrust to get them going and are most satisfactory if they do this naturally, but then weep at the extremities. If they are inspissated weepers from the first, they will grovel given the chance, and we need to give them an initial upward hoist. That too, can often be organized. Our material here ranges from trees down to grasses, many of which have excellent fountain-like habits.

Then there are the **strong personalities**—plants that pull the scene together and prevent it from dissolving into a spineless haze. It may be an annual, like the castor oil bean, or a perennial, like the fast-growing, almost treelike *Dahlia imperialis*, or a shrub, like some of the larger-leaved mahonias. Not only are the leaves of *Mahonia lomariifolia*,

*M. japonica* and the hybrids between them, known as *M. xmedia*, strong, evergreen, and pinnate, but they are arranged in a circle around their shoots so as to stand out boldly. But boldest of all, in my own garden, is *Fatsia japonica*, with its large, shiny, palmate evergreen leaves. Just the partner for softening ferns beneath it.



**The flattened plateaus of yarrows are restful, settled, making good companions for uprights like penstemons**

Some plants are notably amorphous and short on character—many roses are like that, as are the mock oranges, weigelas, deutzias, and berberis—and you want to beware of herding these into shrubberies, where they will be dull features for much of the year. But they are often redeemed when actually flowering, as their flowers are borne along swags and wands of growth and they show up beautifully at that stage. Elders, of the genus *Sambucus*, may have arresting foliage and be grown for that; they are cut back hard on a regular basis to promote the handsomest leaves.

Those that we want to flower, however, are transformed at that time, their flat corymbs of blossom borne in arching curves along the entire length of many branches.

The most satisfactory roses, as garden plants, are those that make long wands in the first year, which we leave unpruned, so that in the second they have wonderful garlands of blossom. The garland effect gives a sense of unity that floribunda and hybrid tea roses, with their chunky habits, cannot emulate.

Finally, in this introductory piece, I should draw attention to the fact that the flowers or leaves, which clothe the shape of a plant's presentation of itself to the world, have their own individuality, which gives a slant to the inflorescence as a whole. For instance, the loose, vertical raceme of a penstemon hybrid is composed of open funnels, whereas the dense spike of a hybrid delphinium is made up of large, usually flattened flowers, each performing its own double act, the "bee" in its center, the ruff of petal-like sepals as a frame. Both might be placed in the category of spikes or spires and be used to give a sense of uplift, but their individual composition will strike us as very different, which makes the game even more interesting. 'W'

# PERENNIALS AND THEIR GARDEN HABITATS

by Richard Hansen and Friedrich Stahl

## THE DANGERS OF MASS-PLANTING

People commonly attempt to imitate the perennial displays of a flower-show or garden festival within their own small gardens. The peculiar circumstances of such plantings, often designed to produce a unique but short-lived decorative effect, are thereby mostly ignored. The result tends to be a massing together of just a few species, incapable of any effective and long-lasting contribution to the garden. The same applies to both wild and border perennials. Wherever conditions allow, plantings should be richly diverse, containing a wide range of different species and cultivars set together in varied association. Of course, the number of different species must not be too great. Limits are set by the size of the planting and the necessity for a rhythmical repetition of various themes within the overall design.

A massed display of just a few species can be monotonous and tends to need a lot of maintenance. Large groups of spring-and early summer-flowering perennials often leave ugly or bare patches later in the year, and a great mass of autumn-flowering plants can be dull until its late climax. A varied but orderly association of ecologically related species and cultivars is crucial for the healthy development and harmonious appearance of a perennial planting. Other plants, such as shrubs, sub-shrubs and grasses can contribute greatly to the overall effect.

The natural grouping of any particular species is closely allied to its form of growth. Strongly spreading rhizomatous plants such as lily-of-the-valley produce a different effect from that of clump-forming species such as hepatica. These different degrees of sociability must be taken into account in the design of planting

## COMING TO KNOW PERENNIALS WITHIN THEIR SURROUNDINGS

Many perennials are very giving. Christopher Loyd said "The great wonder in gardening is that so many plants live." What amazes me are the large number of perennials that are planted without any concern for cultural needs, relationships with each other and maintenance concerns. We still plant them as if they were annuals.

So what should we think about? We can begin with a few general questions. Then allow the answers to begin developing.

- ❖ What are the soil and environmental conditions we are asking the plants to live in?
- ❖ What is the growth and developmental characteristics of plants?
- ❖ Are you relating the conditions the plant does well in to the garden conditions?
- ❖ Have you learned each individual's unique characteristics, flowering time, structure, growth rate, growth habit and form? Once you've learned general characteristics of plants you can begin creating unique combinations.
- ❖ What changes can be expected in the garden from year to year? Then what type of maintenance will be needed to keep the gardens integrity?

The previous questions need to be understood and related to every garden installation. Once you've developed an understanding of all the distinct needs and growing concerns, putting together plant combinations becomes much more interesting and creates less fragmented gardens.



Using perennials in mono-culture mass plantings does create short term impact but generally does not create a long lasting effect. This type of planting also promotes rapid spread of disease and loss of plant material. "A varied but orderly association of ecologically related species and cultivars is crucial for the healthy development and harmonious appearance of a perennial planting." Richard Hansen.

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## PERENNIAL PLANT COMMUNITIES QUESTIONS TO ASK

1. What are three conditions that can cause plant communities to vary from one planting site to another??
2. A plants growth habit is important to understand, name two forms and how they relate to each other in the garden???
3. Give two examples of the value of good foliage in the garden.
4. The creation of style in the garden will always be yours. How does garden ecology fit into your gardening practices and how does it relate to plant selection and plant combinations???
5. As you develop a site, create a style and select plants how has the initial establishment of the planting and long term maintenance played a role in your consideration of the total process???
6. When selecting plants to place in combinations describe three things you would consider.
7. Name two plants with a vertical growth habit and name three plants with a mounding growth habit. From your selections combine two of them together and describe how they would relate to each other as they develop in the garden.

## PLANT COMBINATIONS

*Sporobolus heterolepis* and *Allium* 'Purple Sensation'

*Silphium terebinthinaceum* and *Panicum virgatum*

*Sporobolus* 'Tara' and *Echinacea tennesseensis*

*Sporobolus heterolepis* and *Stachys officinalis* 'Hummelo'

*Sporobolus heterolepis* and *Sesleria Autumnalis* and *Allium* 'Summer Beauty'

*Salvia* 'Amethyst' and *Achillea* 'Walter Funcke' and *Coreopsis* 'Golden Showers' and  
*Hemerocallis* 'Happy Returns' and *Kalimeris* 'Blue Star'

*Deschampsia* 'Gold Tau' and *Astilbe* 'Purpurkurze'

*Sesleria autumnalis* and *Calaminta nepeta* ssp. *nepata*

*Sesleria autumnalis* and *Allium* 'Summer Beauty'

*Sporobolus* 'Tara' and *Geranium sanguineum striatum* and *Sesleria Autumnalis*

*Salvia* 'East Friesland' and *Nepeta* 'Walkers Low'

*Coreopsis* 'Golden Showers' and *Penstemon* 'Huskers Red'

*Stachys* 'Hummelo' and *Monarda* 'Oudolfs Charm' and *Penstemon* 'Huskers Red'

*Salvia* 'Blue Hill' and *Penstemon* 'Huskers Red' and *Allium christophii* and  
*Allium caeruleum*

*Asclepias incarnate* and *Scutellaria incana*

*Echinacea purpurea* and *Nepeta subsessilis*

*Calamagrostis* 'Karl Foerster' and *Nepeta subsessilis* 'Sweet Dreams' and  
*Kalimeris* 'Blue Star'

*Kalimeris* 'Blue Star' and *Sporobolus heterolepis*

*Molinia caerulea* 'Moorhexe'

*Molinia* 'arundinacea 'Transparent'

*Salvia* 'Wesuwe' and *Carex muskingumensis* and *Baptisia* 'Purple Smoke'