



PERENNIAL GARDENING

The Honest Perennial Guide

What "perennial" really means today - and
how to design gardens that actually last.

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HONEST PERENNIAL CO.

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● BEFORE WE BEGIN

Every May long weekend of my childhood, I'd tag along with my mom as she loaded the car with impatiens, petunias, and geraniums. The ritual was as predictable as the holiday itself: pick the brightest plants, fill the baskets and gardens, and water every evening.

Those annuals bloomed reliably until frost, then vanished. There was comfort in the certainty, no surprises, no disappointments. For me, what I watched my mom do all those years was gardening.

I was an adult before I realized I could grow plants that returned year after year. Neighbours shared their perennials, and I watched them emerge each spring, stronger than before. It felt like a miracle. I was hooked.

Over time, I visited gardens across Canada, the U.S., and Europe. I began to see the difference between gardens as seasonal décor - the kind I grew up with, and those that made something shift inside you. Like you were entering another world entirely.

When we moved to our Ontario farm in 2020, I carried that vision with me. I knew what I wanted to achieve: to model those gardens - and inspire and educate others to create their own. What I didn't yet know was how to get there.

Arming the family with spades, we carved gardens out of lawn, and planted thousands of perennials. It was a living experiment, part trial by fire, part stubbornness, and always learning.

What I learned often didn't line up with what I expected, but the goal remains the same: to build beautiful, lasting gardens and help others do the same. Now I see the path.

This is the book I wish I had when I started.

Introduction

It didn't take long to realize the scale of what I had taken on. That first year on the farm, to create gardens with the kind of impact I envisioned, I ordered 15,000 perennial plugs from the commercial catalogue. I chose for height and colour, assuming that traits like movement, longevity, pollinator value, and scent were implied by the very word perennial.

By the next season, those assumptions started to crack. Some plants did exactly what I hoped, coming back stronger. Others never showed up again. Some stood stiff instead of moving with the wind. Pollinators crowded certain blooms while ignoring others. And for plants where I expected fragrance, there was none.

What I was really learning was that choosing plants was going to take more than trusting a tab in a catalogue - it required knowledge I didn't yet have.

● INTRODUCTION

The Knowledge Maze

I went looking for guidance - from gardening books and industry manuals to YouTube and Facebook groups.

It seemed every “expert” contradicted the other. If you drew a Venn diagram of their advice, there would be the thinnest sliver where they agreed.

I now understand why. One world relies on ancestral knowledge - passed down through generations, from when “perennial” meant it would truly last. The other reflects the world today, where modern breeding impacts basic plant reproduction.

That’s when I stopped looking for advice and turned to relying on observation - and a few trusted YouTube mentors.

● INTRODUCTION

The Pivot Point

My pivot point came in the second summer, when I tried to reorder my successful plants. The perennial section that had been so exciting the year before had shrunk by about 70%, while the annuals section had grown.

I was annoyed by the lack of selection, but what really bothered me was realizing I wasn't in control. I couldn't build on the plants that had worked - I had to start over. And given this was only my second year, I had to assume this churn would happen every year.

So, I decided I'd just grow the plants myself. But that's when the second blow hit: some garden favourites couldn't even be grown from seed - or reproduced by me at all.

That one-two punch - no control over what I could order, and no way to grow certain plants myself - was the closest I came to giving up. I could either accept it, walk away, or turn it on its head. I chose to turn it on its head.

● INTRODUCTION

The Big Rethink

Navigating what I could grow - and then how I could grow it, took me miles from the design world I thought I'd be immersed in by this point. But once I let that "let's rethink everything from scratch" genie out of the bottle, there was no putting it back.

Over the following years, I pulled apart every piece of the process - how plants are grown, sold, labeled, packaged, and even how they're categorized.

And now, I've narrowed it down to 80 plants that have truly earned their place in my garden and designs.

This is the outcome of that living lab - the mistakes and the patterns that emerged from watching how hundreds of varieties behave across thousands of plants.

● INTRODUCTION

Learning Organically

My plant knowledge isn't academic or inherited. It comes from firsthand observation of plants I've grown, tested, and watched over multiple seasons.

Looking back, my fresh eyes turned out to be an advantage. I wasn't weighed down by what was supposed to be true - so I could clearly see what was.

If you're reading this with confidence in your own plant knowledge - ancestral or otherwise - I invite you to set it aside, even just for a moment, and see gardening through my eyes.

INTRODUCTION

How This Book Works

This book is part story, part guide: what I discovered about perennials, and the practical lessons you can use to build your own gardens.

- ◆ **Section One** looks at what “perennial” really means today - from the assumptions many of us make, through the growing and production practices that shape a plant’s future, to the surprising resilience of true perennials.
- ◆ **Section Two** shares how I came to think differently about plants in the garden - and the tools I developed along the way.
- ◆ **Section Three** brings it all together with my own curated palette, and guidance for creating a personal palette of your own.

Taken together, these sections are about more than plants. They’re about moving beyond trial-and-error and giving you the confidence to build your dream garden.



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SECTION ONE

The 'P' Word

This section looks at what “perennial” really means today. It challenges old assumptions, shows how breeding and production shape plants, and how to spot a long lasting perennial.