

Design Elements of Beautiful Gardens

Perennial Plant Combinations

There are so many wonderful perennials. Narrowing the selection for your own garden can seem rather daunting. Using some of the design tips below can help you achieve stunning results and create eye-catching combinations.

Before starting, determine the soil, light and moisture conditions in your garden. Understanding the site will help in choosing plants that will thrive and ultimately make the best combinations.

Make a list of favorite plants — ones that will thrive in the soil, moisture and light conditions of your garden. List should include: bloom color, bloom time, foliage color, and mature height/width.

When making combinations, consider the following:

Plant Size and Shape The overall height and width of the plant at maturity is important. Gardens look boring if all of the plants are the same size, even if they vary in color or bloom time. Place larger plants in the background, adding lower-growing perennials in front. Three or four different heights are ideal.

Flower Color Colors can be massed together or intermixed. If you mix colors together, look for complementary colors. Use restraint when combining colors — select a limited color scheme. When using large swathes of an intense color, such as with monarda (bee balm), it is a good idea to include a neutral tone in the garden, such as a white daisy, to help tone things down. This will accentuate the stronger colored plant.

Foliage Color Even leaves come in different colors. Gray and silver plants such as Russian Sage, artemesia, and lamb's ear blend beautifully with green foliage. There are also many plants with variegated leaves. Hostas are a good example of plants with outstanding variegation.

Flower Shape Flowers come in all kinds of shapes, from simple daisies to trumpet-shaped lilies. While color is often the first thing that comes to mind when combining plants, flower shape also helps set a mood and is an important element in garden design. If you desire a monochromatic garden, combine two or three different flower shapes for a beautiful effect. For example, daisies, Asiatic lilies and delphiniums, even if they are all white, make an interesting combination.



Below are eight flower shapes and examples of plants in each category:

- *Daisies* are the shape to choose for a simple, natural look. Asters, shasta daisies, purple coneflowers, rudbeckias, sunflowers, and coreopsis are good examples of this shape.
- *Flatheads* give the eye a place to rest. Examples include butterfly weed, dill, Joe Pye weed, lantana, verbena, and yarrow.
- *Clusters* provide some weight to a design. This shape makes a good transition between different shapes. Clusters include begonia, garden phlox, lady's mantle, spiderwort, and sweet woodruff.
- *Spikes* are great attention getters that add height to your garden. Liatris, cardinal flower, hollyhocks, Russian sage, salvia, and speedwell all fall into this category.
- *Plumes* help make a garden feel informal. Plumes make a good transition shape between spikes and flatheads. Examples of this shape include astilbe, coral bells, goatsbeard, meadow rue, ornamental grasses, and Jupiter's beard.
- *Globes* or rounded shapes really stand out. Use them as accents or focal points. Globes don't have to be a particular size to have an impact. Globe-shaped plants include alliums, monarda, globe thistle, sea thrift and chives.
- *Trumpets and Cups* are similar in shape but have different effects. Trumpets are attention getting while cups are simpler and more casual. Trumpet shapes include bellflowers, daylilies, and Asiatic lilies. Peonies, tulips, and oriental poppies are examples of cup shapes.
- *Fillers* provide a backdrop and fill in bare spots. Examples of fillers include baby's breath, columbine, flax, and sea lavender. Incorporating fillers can also help to highlight a favorite plant. For example, planting baby's breath with lilies makes the lilies the focal point.

Texture

Plants and their leaves fall into one of three textures — fine, medium, and coarse. Texture applies primarily to foliage. Examples of fine-textured plants include ferns, ornamental grasses, lavender and Russian sage. Course-textured plants include hostas, brunnera, berginia, and yucca. Medium-sized leaves bridge fine- and coarse-textured plants. Combine different textures for a great visual effect and contrast. An example of good contrast using different textures is bold-foliaged hostas mixed with fine-textured plants such as fern and perennial geraniums. If you have trouble separating color from texture in your garden, take a black-and-white photo and the different textures will really jump out.

Bloom Time

For year-round interest in your garden, vary the bloom time of the plants. Whether you have color groupings or a dominant color scheme, varying the bloom time will provide for an interesting garden from season to season.

Repetition, another element of garden design, suggests that shapes, textures, colors and sizes should be repeated throughout the garden. Repetition makes the garden easier to look at and holds the design together. By incorporating some or all of these techniques, you will have a garden with good contrast and unity.

Once you have created a beautiful combination, compose another one that looks good with the first. Experiment — find combinations that look and feel right for you and your garden.

Plant Combinations You Might Want to Try

SUN

Peony, <i>Iris pallida</i> 'Variegata' and <i>Leucanthemum superbum</i> 'Hartje and Elder' (daisy)
Rosa 'Nearly Wild', Achillea 'Moonshine' (yarrow) and Salvia 'Blue Hill'
<i>Perovskia atriplicifolia</i> 'Filigran' (Russian Sage), <i>Rudbeckia fulgida</i> 'Goldsturm' (Black-eyed Susan) and <i>Sedum spectabile</i> 'Autumn Joy'
Artemisia 'Powis Castle', Nepeta x faassenii 'Six Hills Giant' and <i>Stachys byzantina</i> (Lamb's Ears)
<i>Perovskia atriplicifolia</i> (Russian Sage), <i>Heliopsis helianthoides</i> 'Summer Sun' (False Sunflower) and <i>Echinacea purpurea</i> 'White Swan' (Coneflower)
Achillea 'Moonshine' (Yarrow), <i>Allium schoenoprasum</i> (Chives) and <i>Thymus vulgaris</i> (Thyme)
<i>Coreopsis verticillata</i> 'Zagreb' and <i>Asclepias tuberosa</i> (Butterfly Weed)
Artemisia 'Powis Castle' and <i>Origanum laevigatum</i> (Oregano)
<i>Echinacea purpurea</i> 'White Swan' (Coneflower), <i>Echinacea purpurea</i> 'Magnus' (Coneflower) and <i>Liatris spicata</i> 'Kobold'
Aster 'Purple Dome', <i>Sedum spectabile</i> 'Autumn Joy' and Artemisia 'Powis Castle'
<i>Solidago canadensis</i> 'Crown of Rays' (Goldenrod) and <i>Aster novae angliae</i> 'Hella Lacy' (New England Aster)
<i>Thalictrum aquilegifolium</i> (Meadow Rue), Achillea 'Moonshine' (Yarrow) and <i>Salvia nemorosa</i> 'May Night'
<i>Miscanthus gracillimus</i> 'Morning Light', <i>Boltonia asteroides</i> 'Snowbank' and <i>Rudbeckia fulgida</i> 'Goldsturm' (Black-eyed Susan)
<i>Echinops bannaticus</i> (Globe thistle) and Daylily 'Frankly Scarlet'
Feather Reed Grass 'Karl Foerster', <i>Echinacea purpurea</i> 'Magnus' (Coneflower) and <i>Perovskia atriplicifolia</i> (Russian Sage)
Clematis 'General Sikorski', Delphinium 'Black Knight' and <i>Iris pseudacorus</i> 'Variegata'
<i>Monarda didyma</i> 'Petite Delight' (Bee Balm), <i>Lavandula angustifolia</i> 'Hidcote' (Lavender) and <i>Thymus serpyllum</i> 'Pink Chintz' (Creeping Thyme)
<i>Baptisia australis</i> (Blue Wild Indigo), <i>Baptisia alba</i> (White Wild Indigo), <i>Allium schoenoprasum</i> 'Forescate'

SHADE

<i>Dicentra spectabilis</i> (Old Fashion Bleeding Heart), <i>Astilbe chinensis</i> 'Vision' and Hosta 'Elegans'
Hosta 'Gold Standard', <i>Dicentra</i> 'Luxuriant' (Bleeding Heart) and <i>Pulmonaria</i> 'Sissinghurst White'
Siberian Iris 'Caesar's Brother' and <i>Alchemilla mollis</i> (Lady's Mantle)
Yew 'Wards', Hosta 'Frances Williams', <i>Heuchera</i> 'Chocolate Ruffles' (Coral Bells) and <i>Liriope muscari</i> 'Variegata'
<i>Corydalis lutea</i> , <i>Polystichum acrostichoides</i> (Christmas Fern) and <i>Hosta lancifolia</i> 'Kabitan'
<i>Dicentra spectabilis</i> (Old Fashion Bleeding Heart), Hosta 'Krossa Regal' and Hosta sieboldiana 'Elegans'
<i>Dicentra formosa</i> 'Luxuriant' (Bleeding Heart) and <i>Polygonatum odoratum</i> 'Variegatum' (Variegated Solomon Seal)
<i>Ajuga reptans</i> and <i>Lamium maculatum</i> 'White Nancy'
Hosta 'Francee' and <i>Adiantum pedatum</i> (Maidenhair fern)
<i>Phlox divaricata</i> (Wild Blue Phlox), <i>Symphytum grandiflorum</i> (Comfrey) and <i>Polystichum acrostichoides</i> (Christmas Fern)
<i>Hosta fortunei</i> 'Albo-picta', <i>Heuchera</i> 'Pewter Veil' (Coral Bells) and <i>Pulmonaria</i> 'Excalibur'
<i>Heuchera</i> 'Palace Purple' (Coral Bells), <i>Astilbe japonica</i> 'Europa' and <i>Athyrium filix-femina</i> (Lady Fern)
<i>Osmunda claytoniana</i> (Interrupted Fern) and <i>Asarum canadense</i> (Wild Ginger)
<i>Aruncus dioicus</i> (Goat's Beard), <i>Stylophorum diphyllum</i> (Celandine Poppy) and <i>Athyrium filix-femina</i> (Lady Fern)
<i>Tradescantia</i> (Spiderwort), Hosta 'Paul's Glory' and <i>Astilbe</i> 'Peaches and Cream'
<i>Osmunda cinnamomea</i> (Cinnamon Fern), Hosta 'Sum and Substance' and <i>Brunnera</i> 'Jack Frost'
<i>Aquilegia canadensis</i> (Columbine), <i>Iris versicolor</i> 'Blue Flag' and <i>Liriope muscari</i> 'Majestic'
<i>Athyrium nipponicum pictum</i> (Japanese Painted Fern) and Hosta 'Red October'

REV 9/2015

Extension Master Gardener Hotline

(913) 715-7050

garden.help@jocogov.org

"Kansas State University Agricultural Experiment Station and Cooperative Extension Service."

K-State Research and Extension is committed to making its services, activities, and programs accessible to all participants. If you have special requirements due to a physical, vision, or hearing disability, please contact Johnson County Extension at 913.715.7000. K-State Research and Extension is an equal opportunity provider and employer.