

Ask a MG Question

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Planting Perennials in the Fall

Q. I moved here in July from up North and am anxious to get started on my flowerbeds. Can I plant perennials here now or should I wait until next spring?

A. Although perennials grown in pots can be planted any time, fall is generally preferred over spring in the South, because plants will not have to contend with intense summer heat while getting established. This also means less maintenance like weeding, watering and fertilizing (use only small amounts of slow-release fertilizer pellets in the hole at planting time in fall). Even though the first winter freeze will cause the foliage of most newly-planted perennials to wither and die, a lot of root development takes place beneath the surface throughout winter. Strong roots will better support new spring growth and result in healthier plants overall.

Even though fall is the preferred planting time for perennials, the biggest problem you'll encounter is finding them. Since perennials sell better when they are blooming, fall beauties like chrysanthemums, asters, and autumn joy sedum will be plentiful. However, nurseries typically only have leftovers from spring stock which may be root-bound and in a pathetic state of decline after struggling on shelves over summer.

Your best bet for spring blooming perennials may be finding a gardener willing to share with you. For best results, the general rule is to divide fall blooming perennials in spring and spring bloomers in fall. Fall divisions should be planted about six weeks before the first anticipated freeze. This typically happens in our Zone 7b between late October and mid-November, so time is running out this year. Spring divisions of fall blooming perennials can be planted in mid-March through April.

October is best for planting heat-tolerant varieties of peonies and also daffodil bulbs which are perennial here. On the other hand, cool season bulbs such as tulips and hyacinths should be chilled in the refrigerator for 6 to 8 weeks and then planted outside in mid-November or later. Unfortunately, due to our intense heat and humidity, they are generally treated as annuals.

I like to put between one and three perennials (hosta, huechera, trailing plants, small grasses and petite evergreen shrubs) in giant pots along with several annuals that can be changed out each season for continuous color. Violas, pansies, snapdragons, kale and chard which are grown in summer up North can be planted here now. Though freezing weather will cause a setback, a drink of liquid fertilizer followed by several warm days will perk them up. It seems mine always look best in mid-April when it's time to rip them out and plant summer annuals (April 15 is the last average freeze date here).

You should not even consider planting perennials now unless your beds are properly prepared. This process involves having a soil test done through the UGA Extension office located in the Ag Center, and then tilling in recommended amendments such as aged pine bark, manure or

other compost, sand and lime. Raised beds will allow for better drainage and a two-inch layer of mulch will protect roots and help prevent weeds. Fortunately, the South affords many nice days in which to work. Next spring you'll be ready to plant.

Always have your utilities marked before digging or building beds. This is a free service done in three to four working days. Initially calling 811 will prevent having to call 911 later. For all your gardening questions, contact a Master Gardener Extension Volunteer at 770-836-8546, via e-mail at ccmg@uga.edu or visit our office in the Ag Center at 900 Newnan Road in Carrollton.