

# WINTER PLANNING FOR SPRING BLOOMS

By Katrina Simmons

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Do you want perennial gardens that are environmentally friendly? Now is the time to start planning for next year's show of spring-to-fall blooms. The key to maintaining them without pesticides lies in your choice of plants.

## **Blooms from April through October**

A continual show of colour can be tricky, since many popular species are early bloomers. "Too many spring-flowering perennials in a garden will guarantee a lack of colour later in the summer," says Harry Jongerden, Designer/Horticulturalist for the Royal Botanical Gardens. He recommends using spring flowering bulbs instead, like crocus, daffodil and tulips. They will give you colour when you crave it most, without the abundant foliage after the blooms are spent. Plant them amongst a variety of perennials, especially those that bloom later in the season.

## **The right plant for the right place**

Hamilton is in Zone 5a and 6a, according to Agriculture Canada's 2000 plant hardiness zone map. A hard winter will weaken or kill plants from a milder climate (zone 7 and up). More robust perennials, hardy to zone 4 or 5 (or under) stand a better chance of breezing through our winters.

Choose plants that are well suited to your particular garden. Varieties that can tolerate some drought will bloom longer and fare better in our mid-summer heat waves, when the city places restrictions on watering. If a plant requires full sun, it will need at least six hours of it each day to stay healthy and produce prolific blooms. Watch the progress of the sun across your yard to determine the best location. Plants for full shade need similar consideration: they will be stressed, require excessive amounts of water, and flower for only a short period if they are in a sunny location.

Soil acidity is another consideration. Most of the soil around our limestone escarpment is slightly alkaline. Choose from the broad range of flowers and shrubs that thrive in this type of soil to ensure they have a long and stress-free life.

## **Pest and disease resistant**

Disease-resistant plants will save you a lot of work and frustration. Often it's the heritage varieties of flowers that are the hardiest. But it's the newer cultivars of asters, hollyhocks and phlox that stay free of fungi through even the wettest summer.

To help control insect pests next year, leave some of the old foliage, stems and seed heads in the garden when the plants go dormant. They are a food source for birds, and habitat for beneficial insects. Diseased and badly infested materials should be removed, but the old plants add visual interest to your yard through the winter, and insulate against a mid-winter thaw.

## **Keep the soil cool all year**

Mulching (i.e. covering the soil surface) with at least four centimetres of bark chips, coco shells, or other natural materials will help cool the soil and retain moisture. Top dressing with well rotted manure or garden compost in the spring and fall will do the same, as well as provide a slow, steady feed of nutrients. Keep the mulch one or two centimetres away from the base of the plants to ensure good air circulation around stems and crowns.

Southern Ontario's winter freeze-thaw cycles push roots closer to the surface, and trigger them out of dormancy. A sudden drop in temperature damages tender new growth, and weakens the plant. Throw a thick cover of leaves or compost over everything after the ground is frozen to provide protection from sudden temperature changes.

## **Start planning now**

This year, after you've put your gardens to bed, snuggle up with a good perennial plant guide. Find strong and hardy plants that suit your unique setting, then pre-order from your local garden centre. You'll be sure to dream in enviro-friendly, full-season colour.

For more advice on pesticide-free gardens, pick up the phone and call Green Venture's Yard Improvement Help Line at 905-540-8787 x 18.