

Let's look at a few unusual perennials



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Melianthus major has spikes of attractive reddish-brown flowers, but serrated the foliage is the showstopper. PHOTO BY MIKE DARCY

Sometimes a word that gardeners often use can convey different meanings, depending on the context. The speaker’s intended meaning can be quite different from what the listener hears or understands.

The word “perennial” is a good example. Generally, it is used to refer to a plant that lives for a number of years and usually flowers each year. Often gardeners use the term to mean an herbaceous plant, with a peony being a good example.

A peony will send up new stems in the early spring, then bloom several months later. By late summer and early fall, the leaves and stems will begin to die. At that time, gardeners will usually prune it to ground level, removing the distressed leaves and stems. Although the tops are dead, the roots live on below the ground. The plant will be dormant for the winter and then renew itself in the spring.

But what about trees and shrubs? Aren’t they also perennials? Technically, yes. But in common garden terminology? Probably not.

Sometimes, shrubs are referred to as a woody perennial. That is defined as not only a plant that lives more than one year, but one that has hard rather than fleshy stems and has buds that survive above the ground.

However, most gardeners would probably refer to them as just shrubs rather than perennial shrubs.

Examples of perennial shrubs

Solidago ‘Crown of Rays’ (golden-rod), is a North American native herbaceous perennial. This easy grow, easy care plant gives gardeners vibrant yellow gold flowers in late summer and early fall. The flowers are good pollinators and provide a source of food for butterflies and birds, as well as making a good cut flower for the



The orchid-like flowers of *Impatiens tinctoria* appear in late summer. PHOTO BY MIKE DARCY

house. The flower stalks should be left on the plant so that seeds are produced which are a favorite diet of gold finches.

A plant growing in tropical Africa would most likely not be expected to perform well in our Pacific Northwest environment, but the hardy impatiens, *Impatiens tinctoria*, is an exception. Expect it to die to the ground in the late fall and with a layer of garden mulch, it should survive the winter. It’s fast growing, with bamboo-like stems that can reach up to 5–6 feet tall in one season. Give it a shady spot, or morning sun location in the garden. The orchid-like flowers appear in late summer, and this year with the mild fall have persisted into November. With the tall stems, plant it in the background of lower growing plants.

With underground stems that can appear 8–10 feet from the mother plant, *Tetrapanax papyrifera* ‘Steroidal Giant’, >>

What I'm Hearing

is a native of Taiwan that is an aggressive spreader and needs plenty of room. Planting it in a large pot would be a good way to enjoy the plant and keep it in check. Huge, tropical-looking leaves make this a focal feature in the garden. Left unchecked, it can become like a forest.

I have an area in the front of our house where there is plenty of room and I have just let it take over. In the summer, it is a mass of huge leaves. When cold weather arrives, the leaves tend to die, leaving bare stems, almost like small tree trunks. When we had the severe freeze two years ago, the plants died to the ground but came back in the spring with a vengeance.

Native to Southern California and Baja, *Romneya coulteri* (matilija poppy) is a spectacular perennial. With its gray-green leaves, it looks good even when not in bloom. But when the flowers appear, WOW! It has a cluster of golden yellow stamens that are



With temperatures becoming warmer, many gardeners are pushing the zone and are growing plants that generally would not survive our winters like this *Tibouchina urvilleana*, (princess flower). PHOTO BY MIKE DARCY

surrounded by white petals that have a look of crepe paper. The flowers appear in late spring and into summer.

Planted in full sun, *Romneya* is drought tolerant and does not usually need supplemental irrigation. This grows into a large shrub, so give it plenty of room. It spreads by rhizomes and can be



Native to Southern California and Baja, *Romneya coulteri* (matilija poppy) is a spectacular perennial. PHOTO BY MIKE DARCY

an aggressive spreader, but it is easy to keep in check. If you cut the stems to the ground in late fall, new shoots will appear in the spring.

One of my favorite foliage plants is *Melianthus major*. It does have spikes of attractive reddish-brown flowers, but the foliage has an outstanding tropical look and that is what I like. The grayish green foliage has leaves that are divided into leaflets with serrated edges. The leaves may look sharp but are very soft to the touch.

There have been several years when due to cold temperatures, the foliage has died to the ground, but in the spring new growth soon appears. It can make a very impressive statement in the garden and will look good all summer and into the fall season.

Pushing the zone

With temperatures becoming warmer, many gardeners are pushing the zone and are growing plants that generally would not survive our winters. What do we call a plant that is generally considered as a tropical or semi-tropical and now is happily growing in our garden here? How about “amazing?”

For example, I have a *Tibouchina urvilleana*, (princess flower), that over the summer has grown into a large shrub. As I write this column, it is January 23, and the plant is in full bloom and has never looked better.

I wonder what other “technically speaking” perennials and tropicals I can add to my garden to improve my special space. ©

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