

Low-Maintenance Perennials: *Plants, beds, & design*

Ellen A. Vincent
Environmental
Landscape Specialist
Clemson University



A PERENNIAL plant:

- Lives for two or more years
- May be herbaceous (non-woody stems) or woody
- Herbaceous perennial examples:
Achillea, Coreopsis, Echinacea, Liatris, Phlox

Herbaceous perennial plants:



Woody perennial plants:

- Maintain a persistent stem above ground during cold weather
- May or may not lose leaves in cold weather
- Examples: *Lavandula*, *Perovskia*, *Rosmarinus*

Woody perennial plants:



Photo: Sima Kagan



Rosmarinus officinalis
Rosemary
Photo by Michael Moore

Low-maintenance perennials

- Do not need staking under normal conditions
- Are winter cold hardy and summer heat tolerant
- Are resistant to recurring insect and disease infestations
- Do not need to be divided for at least three years
- Possess attractive foliage during entire growing season

Low-maintenance perennials

- Are specific to place and environment
- Prefer well-drained, moderately fertile soil
- Require ample moisture
- Prefer a pH of 5.5-7.0
- Need to be divided every 3 years (in many cases)

Amsonia hubrechtii

- Arkansas amsonia
- Full sun/part shade
- 36" high x 48" w
- Sky blue blooms in late spring
- Bright yellow foliage in fall
- Zones 3-9



Amsonia tabernaemontana

- Blue star
- Full sun/part shade
- 24-36" h x 18" w
- Periwinkle blue blooms in late spring
- Zones 3-9



Anemone hupehensis var. *japonica*

- Japanese anemone
- Full sun/part shade
- 4-5' h x 2' w
- Pale pink semi-double blooms in late summer through early autumn
- Attractive seed pods
- Zones 3-9



Athyrium nipponicum 'Pictum'

- Japanese painted fern
- Part shade
- 8-12" h x 15-18" w
- Lance shaped silver gray green leaves with maroon midribs
- 'Ursula's Red' bred in SC
- Zones 5-8



Asarum canadense

- Canadian wild ginger
- Part to full shade
- 6" h x 6" w
- Heart shaped leaves
- Brown bell shaped flowers hidden by foliage in spring
- Zones 2-8



Astilbe x arendsii

- Hybrid astilbe
- Part to full shade
- 18"-4' h x 24" w
- Fern like foliage
- Cultivars range from pink, to red, white, to lavender purple
- Zones 4-8



Baptisia australis

- False indigo blue
- Sun to part shade
- 5' h x 2' w
- Fern like foliage
- Tiny deep blue blooms in early summer
- Deep blue to black seed pods
- Zones 3-9



Caryopteris x clandonensis

- Blue beard
- Sun to part shade
- 3' h x 5' w
- Flowers on current years growth (woody)
- Small but abundant blue to purple blooms in late summer to early autumn
- 'Dark Knight' has deep blue blooms
- Zones 6-9



Coreopsis verticillata 'Moonbeam'

- Threadleaf coreopsis
- Sun
- 18" h x 18" w
- Pale yellow blooms from summer through early fall
- Fine textured foliage
- Zones 4-9



Cuphea hyssopifolia

- Mexican heather
- Sun to partial shade
- 12-24" h x 8-32" w
- Tiny pink to purple to white flowers from summer into autumn
- Woody stems
- Zones 8-10



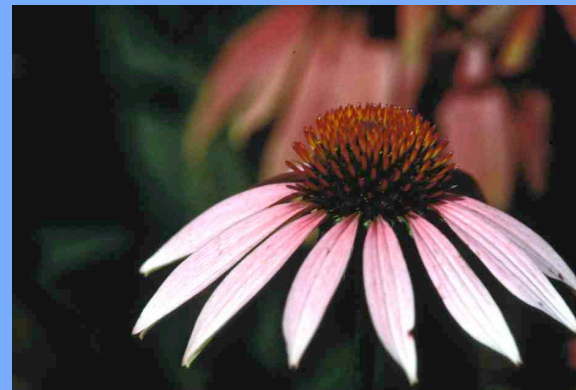
Delosperma cooperi

- Purple hardy ice plant
- Sun
- 4-8" h x 24" w
- Daisy-like glossy purple flowers in mid to late summer
- Woody stems
- Zones 6-10



Echinacea purpurea

- Purple coneflower
- Sun
- 4' h x 18" w
- Rosy-purple flowers in midsummer to autumn
- Zones 3-9



Foeniculum vulgare 'Purpureum'

- Bronze fennel
- Sun
- 6' h x 18" w
- Bronze purple foliage is finely cut and feathery on tips
- Zones 4-9



Gaura lindheimeri

- White gaura
- Sun
- 5' h x 3' w
- Pink buds open to white blooms late spring to early autumn
- Slender stems and leaves
- "Siskiyou Pink" cultivar
- Zones 5-9



Hedychium coccineum



- Red ginger lily
- Sun or partial shade
- 10' h x 3' w
- Deep red, pink, orange, or white blooms in up to 10" long racemes in late summer to autumn
- Long lance shaped leaves
- Zones 8-10



Hedychium coronarium

- White ginger lily
- Sun or partial shade
- 10' h x 3' w
- Fragrant white blooms in up to 8" long racemes in mid to late summer
- Long lance shaped leaves
- Zones 9-10



Helianthus angustifolius

- Swamp sunflower
- Sun or partial shade
- 5-7' h x 4' w
- Daisy-like flower heads up to 3" across in late summer early autumn
- Rough hairy stems and narrow lance shaped leaves to 8"
- Zones 6-9



Helleborus orientalis

- Lenten rose
- Full to partial shade
- 18" h x 18" w
- Nodding saucer shaped white flowers often stained green and pale pink, in midwinter to midspring
- Basal leathery leaves evergreen
- Zones 4-9



Hemerocallis hybrids

- Daylily
- Full sun
- 6-48" h x 12-36" w
- Wide color range of blooms; 'Hyperion' & 'Happy Returns' are yellow
- Basal leathery leaves evergreen
- Zones 3-10



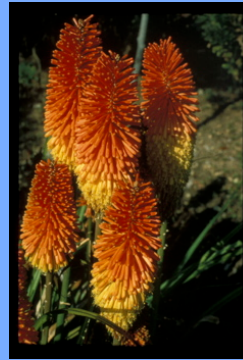
Iris sibirica 'Caesar's Brother'

- Siberian iris
- Full sun to partial shade
- 36" h x 24-36" w
- Deep purple beardless flowers in early summer
- Leaves are narrow and grass-like
- Zones 3-9



Kniphofia uvaria

- Common torch lily
- Full sun to partial shade
- 4' h x 4' w
- Red buds open to orange and fade to yellow in summer
- Zones 3-9



Lavandula stoechas

- French lavender
- Full sun
- 24" h x 24" w
- Spikes of fragrant deep purple blooms topped by purple bracts in late spring to summer
- Subspecies *pedunculata* Spanish lavender, bears flowers well above foliage
- Fragrant silver green foliage
- Zones 8-9



Liatris spicata 'Kobold'

- Spike gayfeather
- Full sun
- 24" h x 24" w
- Pinkish purple flower spikes in mid-late summer into autumn
- 'Kobold' does not need staking
- Zones 3-9



Muhlenbergia capillaris

- Pink muhly grass
- Full sun
- 4' h x 3' w
- Airy pink blooms in late summer
- Narrow grass leaves
- Zones 6-10



Perovskia atriplicifolia



- Russian sage
- Full sun
- 4' h x 4' w
- Lavender blue blooms from summer into fall
- Silver green fragrant foliage
- Zones 3-9



Phlox paniculata 'David'

- Garden phlox
- Full sun. partial shade
- 4' h x 2-3' w
- White fragrant blooms in summer
- 'David' is resistant to powdery mildew
- Zones 3-8





Polygonatum odoratum 'Variegatum'

- Fragrant Solomon's seal
- Partial to full shade
- 3' h x 2' w
- Pendent white blooms along stems in late spring or early summer
- Arching stems with white margined leaves
- Zones 4-8



Rosmarinus officinalis

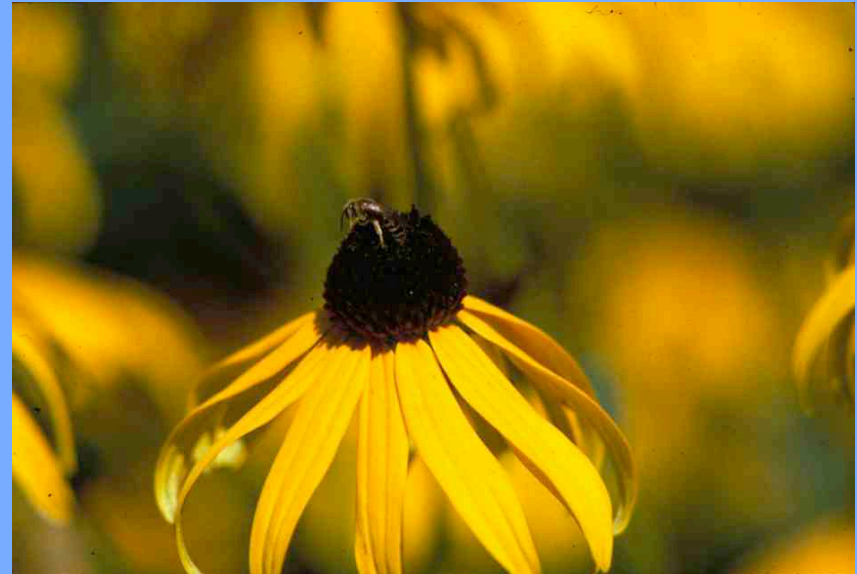
- Rosemary
- Full sun
- 4' h x 4' w
- Whorls of tiny blue blooms from midspring into summer and again in autumn
- Fragrant evergreen leaves on woody stems
- Zones 8-10



Rosmarinus officinalis
Rosemary
Photo by Michael Moore

Rudbeckia fulgida var. *sullivantii* 'Goldsturm'

- Black-eyed-Susan
- Full sun
- 36" h x 18" w
- Daisy-like yellow flowers with a mahogany disk from summer into autumn
- Fragrant evergreen leaves on woody stems
- Zones 4-9



Salvia greggii



- Autumn sage
- Full sun
- 12-20" h x 12-20" w
- Pairs of red to purple, pink, yellow, or violet flowers from late summer into autumn
- Woody evergreen
- Zones 7-9



Salvia uliginosa



- Bog sage
- Full sun and moist soil
- Up to 6' h x 13" w
- Blue flowers in late summer to mid autumn
- Zones 8-10



Santolina rosmarinifolia (virens)

- Lavender cotton
- Full sun
- Up to 24" h x 24" w
- Yellow button-like blooms in mid to late summer
- Zones 6-9



Scabiosa columbaria 'Butterfly Blue' and 'Pink Mist'

- Scabious
- Full sun
- Up to 24" h x 30" w
- Pincushion like blooms appear during summer and winter
- Zones 5-8



Solidago rugosa 'Fireworks'

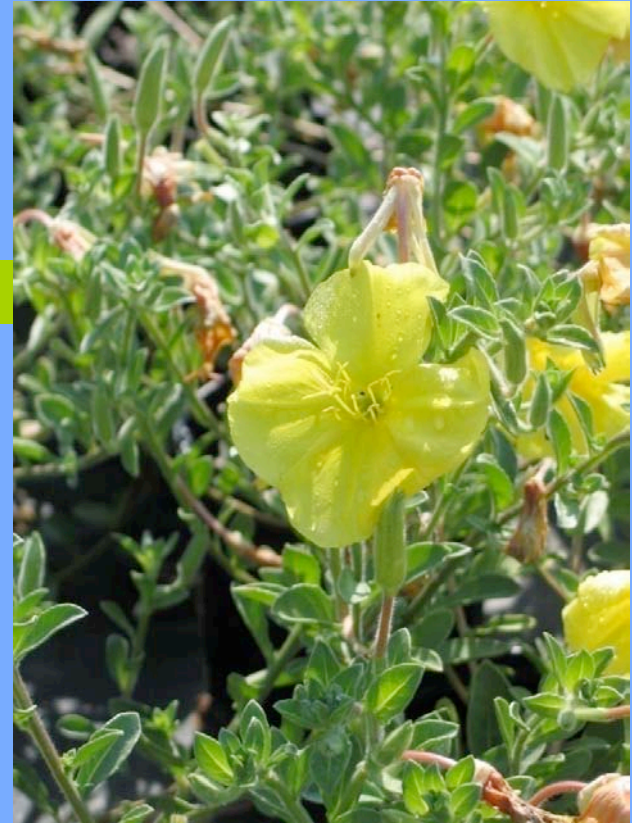
- Goldenrod
- Full sun
- 24-36" h x 24-36" w
- Yellow blooms in late summer and autumn
- Zones 4-8



Trial plant

Oenothera drummondii

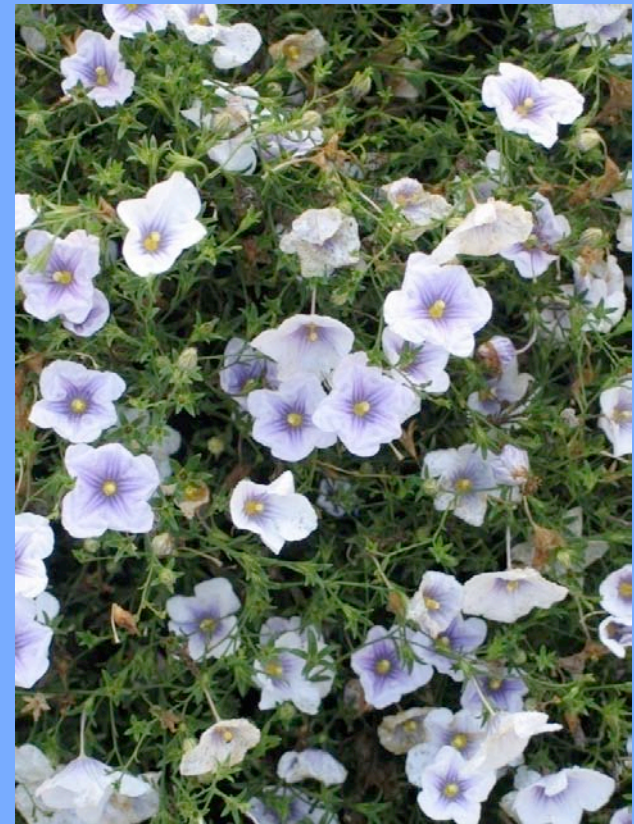
- Beach evening primrose
- Full sun
- low, spreading stems
- Yellow single blooms
- Long season blooming
- Secondary dune colonizer; spreads by seed; does not displace native plants; withstands limited salt spray



Trial plant

Nierembergia gracilis 'Starry Eyes'

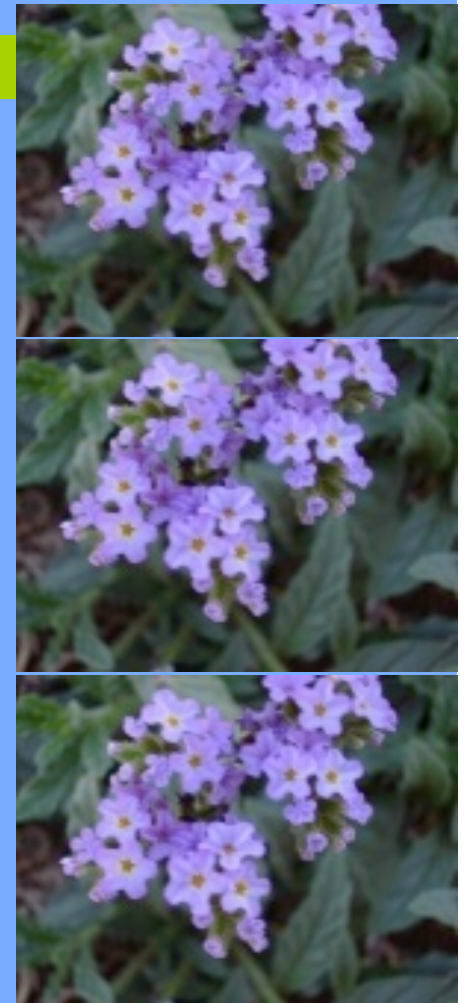
- Starry eyes nierembergia
- Full sun
- 10" -24" h x w
- Light lavender/blue blooms face upwards
- Mounding habit
- Zones 7-9
- Native to Argentine desert, Yucca do selection



Trial plant

Heliotropium amplexicaule

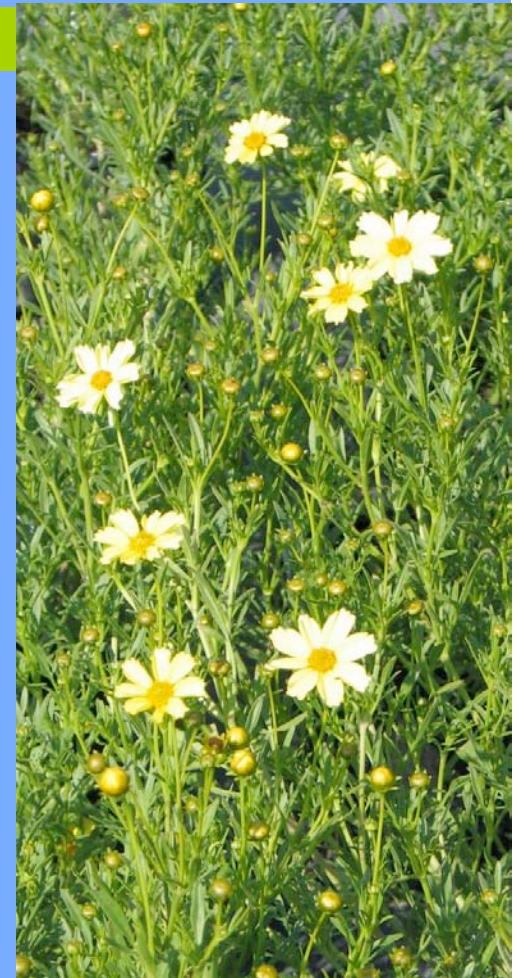
- Creeping heliotrope
- Full sun, drought tolerant
- 6" h x 3-5' w
- Free flowering pale blue flowers
- Attracts butterflies
- Zones 7-9
- Native to South America



Trial plant

Coreopsis 'Crème Brulee'

- Threadleaf coreopsis crème brulee
- Full sun
- Golden yellow blooms along stalk
- 20" h x 35" w
- Zones 4-9
- USPP #16096; reputed to be an improved *C. verticillata* 'Moonbeam'



Trial plant

Eragrostis elliotii

- Blue love grass
- Full sun
- 18' h x 36" w
- Blue-silver foliage
- Zones 8-11
- Native to southeastern U.S.

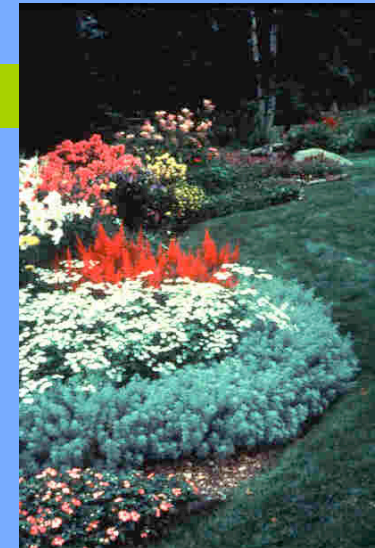


Low-Maintenance perennials in the landscape

- Require intensive planning, design, selection, and installation
- Are selected for foliage color and texture as well as bloom
- Reduce pesticide usage
- Reduce maintenance

Types of Perennial Gardens

- Perennial Island Bed:
 - Freestanding garden that is viewed from all sides. Usually kidney shaped and often raised to promote drainage
- Perennial Border:
 - May be double or single. Has a backdrop of a wall or woody shrubs. Generally viewed from one side only



5 Principles of Design



- Simplicity
- Focalization
- Balance
- Scale
- Rhythm & Line/Effect on Senses

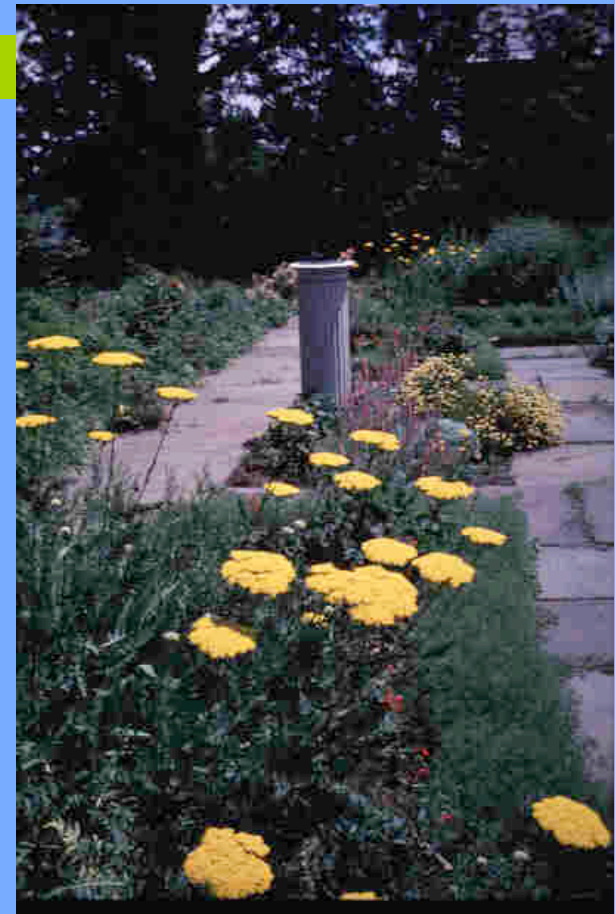
Simplicity

- Achieved through repetition of plant material and construction material
 - Color
 - Texture
 - Shape
 - Line
 - Size



Focalization

- Focal Point:
 - Immediately draws the eye
 - Belong is the center of the bed
 - Small gardens need only one focal point
 - Large gardens may parade several focal points throughout the central area



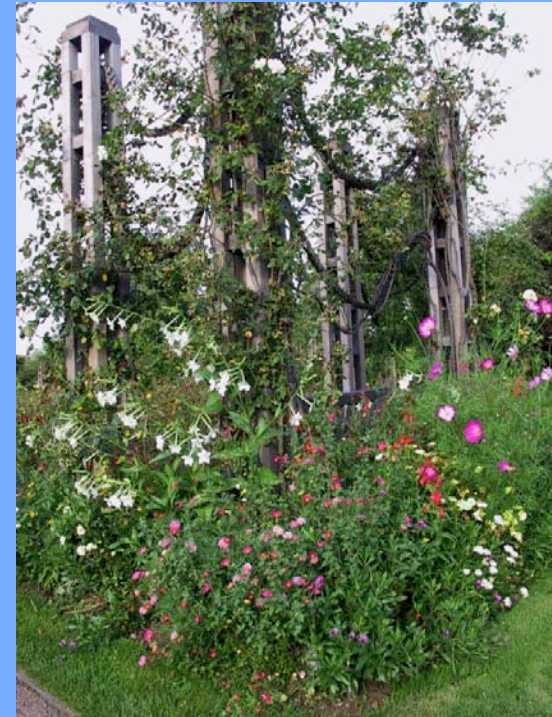
Balance



- Symmetrical
 - Both sides are identical
- Asymmetrical
 - Each side contains plants that resemble each other in terms of texture, height or color, but plants are not identical

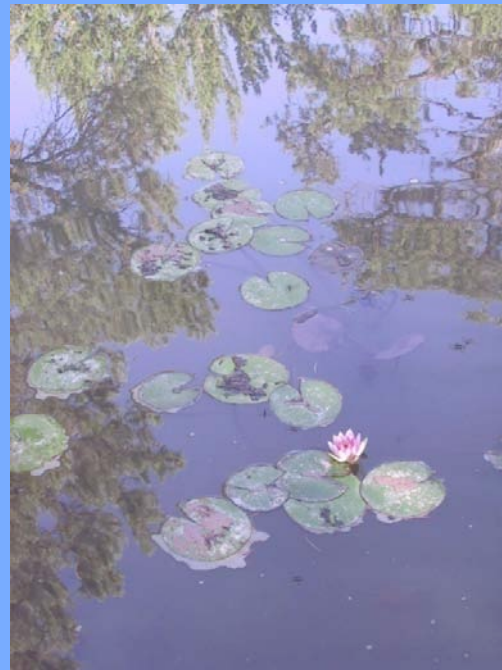
Scale

- The relative proportion of plants to each other and to objects in the landscape



Rhythm & Line/Effect on Senses

- How the eye moves through the landscape
- How the landscape effects all the senses



Sissinghurst white garden



Customer Interview

- Discover clients' preferences
 - Ask client to show you pictures of gardens/landscapes they like
 - Bring your own collection of pictures/photos in case they don't have any
 - Ask questions about the picture to discover exactly what they like or dislike
 - Don't assume the client likes the same things you do

Proper Plant Selection/ Arrangement

- Choose low-maintenance species/cultivars
- Group plants in bed by growth rates to facilitate division process
- Plant groups of each species/cultivar rather than spotting plants here and there
- Arrange plants so certain areas of the bed are in bloom at same time
- Plan for year round appeal
- Add annuals/bulbs/shrubs for added interest

Benefits of Vegetative Mulch

- Reduces weed seed germination
- Retains soil moisture
- Adds organic matter as it decomposes
- Keeps soil temperatures relatively constant
- Keeps foliage clean
- May be aesthetically pleasing

Mulch Note:

- Recommend 3-4" deep for maximum effectiveness
- Insist that mulch does not touch the stem of the plant

Seabrook Island, SC



Design Note:

- Place taller plants toward the back of the perennial border and throughout the center of the island bed

Design Note:

- Place plants according to their mature size or their 3 year size
- Many perennials will be spaced 18" apart



Design Note:

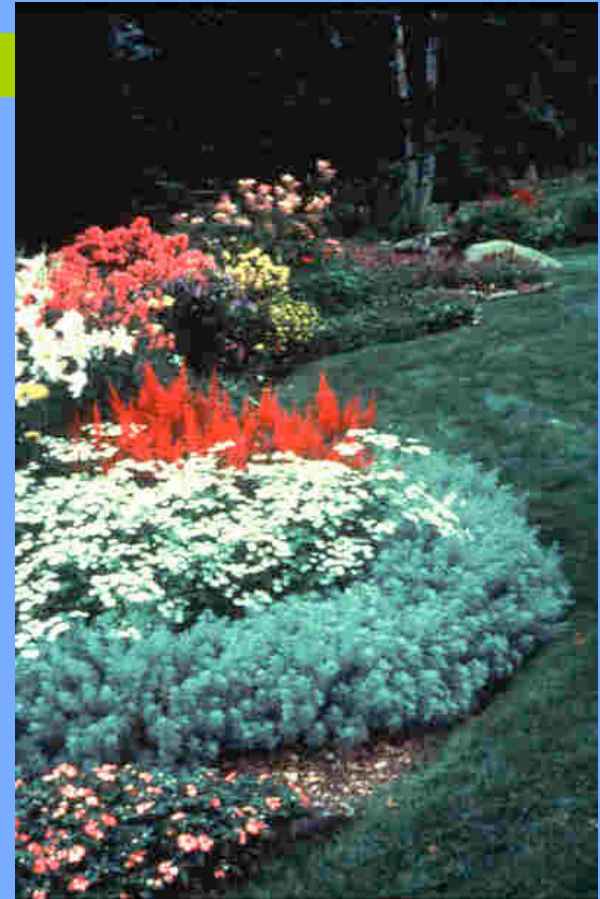
- Place plants in triangle formations to maximize flowering and foliage effect



Design Note:

- When creating a hot color vibrant border, surround the bold colors with white or silver to avoid a harsh gaudy look

Fred McGourtey's island display bed, Conn.



Environmental Landscape Note:

- Place plants with similar water requirements together in the bed
 - See *Xeriscape: Landscape Water Conservation in the Southeast*
Clemson publication EC 672
- Drought tolerant plants still require moisture during establishment

Design Note:

- Place plants with spiky or distinctive flowers and foliage toward the center of the bed as they are focal points.



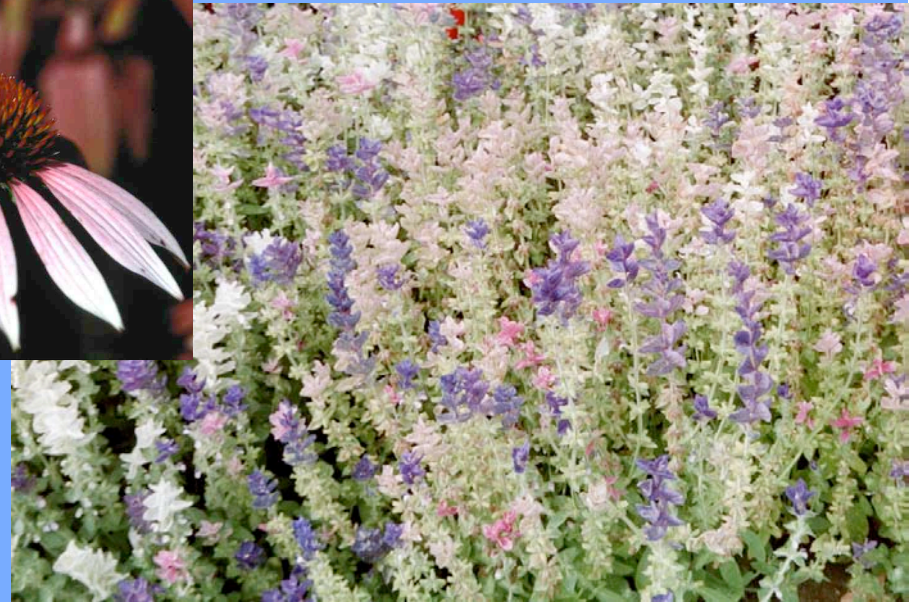
Design Note:

- Place round, open shaped blooms and foliage plants at the edges and front of the garden as they blend well with other plants and allow the eye to gently leave the garden



Design Note:

- For a soothing effect use dark colors sparingly and soft colors in abundance



Design Note:

- Mass plants in odd numbers whenever possible

Hosta glen--SC Botanical Garden



Design Note:

- Note sun exposure, soil preferences, water requirements, cold and heat tolerance of plants before selecting



Perennial literature

Color Schemes for the Flower Garden by
Gertrude Jekyll

Herbaceous Perennial Plants by Allan Armitage

Manual of Herbaceous Ornamental Plants by
Steven Still

*Miracle-Gro Guide to Growing Beautiful
Flowers*, editor Denny Schrock, chapter
author Ellen Strother (Vincent)

Contact information



- Ellen A. Vincent
- Environmental Landscape Specialist
- Horticulture Dept. Box 340319
- Clemson, SC 29634-0319
- 864.656.1342
- 803.243.8888 (cell)
- ellenav@clemson.edu