WHATEVER OTHER FEATURES a garden may possess, a perennial border is usually at its heart. One would think, then, that the perennial border would be the most carefully designed of all a garden’s features, contrived not only to supply the maximum amount of bloom throughout the growing season, but also to reflect the most subtle and careful planning. Though an exuberant, romantic tumble of flower is the aim of most gardeners, subtle underlying principles of order must also exist, else the border may slip easily from romantic exuberance into what might frankly be called a mess.

We may best begin by defining what is meant by the words “perennial border.” To start with, it is not a flower bed, for that is apt to be a depressingly narrow strip of plants along a house wall, or worse, one floating without anchor somewhere out there in the lawn.

A proper perennial border should have visual richness at all times, with flowers to admire and flowers to cut, from spring to fall, and perhaps even with berries, seed heads, and branches for forcing, from winter to spring. The most successful perennial borders contain far more diversity than may be offered by herbaceous perennials alone. An enormous gain is made if one thinks also of including small trees, tall and short woody shrubs, flowering vines, evergreens, bulbs, and annuals. True gardeners will delight in enlarging the sorts of plants they can grow, but this wider range also makes possible several other goals. First, the season of flower (or of berry, twig, and seed head) is extended; second, a more varied composition of form and texture becomes possible; and third, one can garden vertically, in the air, as it were, by lifting the interest of the

One cannot make a satisfactory garden picture without some big foliage of a rounded nature like that of bergenias, Japanese anemones, and hostas, contrasted with the erect lines of irises and grasses. Further if these more conspicuous leaves are kept in the foreground of a view, and the small-leaved shrubs and plants at the end, it will help to make the garden appear larger.

—Graham Stuart Thomas, Perennial Garden Plants
border up from the tallest perennials, which are at best no more than six or so feet tall, to layers that may extend to 15 feet, or even 20. When it includes this diversity, a perennial border is no longer strictly what that term implies. Rather, we have a mixed border, in which garden plants of many categories are blended together, de-ghettoized, one might say.

The Need for Depth in a Border
Incorporating this diversity into our borders has a clear first consequence: The border must be larger—really quite a bit larger—than the traditional flower bed of five or so feet. Gardeners may be daunted by the concept of a border 20 feet in depth, or even more. But to achieve continuous interest from earliest spring through the last, mellow days of November may require one that may be far longer than one might have thought possible. For a border must be ample enough to accommodate not only the shortest to the tallest perennials and annuals, but also, perhaps, boxwoods, trimmed yews, berberis, shrub roses, lilacs, cherries, crab apples, dogwoods, and the like. My rule of thumb calls for a border whose length is at least five times its depth, longer if possible. I know that many gardeners tremble at the thought of such vast spaces to weed. But, really, the spread of small trees and large bushes shades out many undesirable plants, and the use of generous drifts of reliably sturdy perennials gives them little place. Anyway, to quote the great Irish poet W. B. Yeats, “Although they do not talk of it at school...we must labor to be beautiful.” Which is to say, you are in it, or you’re not.

Choosing a Framework
A central convention of border design is the use of a hedge, wall, or fence at the back, against which plants are arranged. As with most conventions, if one can look beneath its mere automatic ubiquity, it contains wisdom. The very richness of a mixed flower border—its plants, their complexity of growth or of leaf, twig, and flower—requires an organizing screen against which to display itself. The appreciating eye, bound to play excitedly in and among various colors, textures, and shapes, has to have a place to stop, a rest, a statement that what is to be enjoyed lies just here, in front, and not all about the place. Both drama and painting provide useful metaphors to this controlled visual activity, for the backdrop to a border is much like the frame of a painting or the proscenium arch within which a play occurs. Both can be dispensed with, and they have been, in painting as in the performing arts. But they are dispensed with at some risk, and with some reason, after due consideration by the artist or dramatist. Otherwise, they are wisely taken simply as a given, as is the necessity to back a flower border with some firm line—hedge, fence, or wall—that separates it from the surrounding landscape.

Assuming that we may pass over the iris nut, or the daylily fanatic, both of whom are wonderfully able to

—Graham Stuart Thomas, Perennial Garden Plants
ignore the rest of the plant world in favor of one
genus, most gardeners want lots of plants and will be
as impatient of spatial limitations as decent growing
practices will allow. So the flower border is apt to con-
tain—should contain—a welter of plants, positively
packed in. But after the length and depth of the bor-
der have been (I hope generously) determined, and a
firm backdrop has been placed behind it, the crucial
question then emerges: "How can all these plants be
harmoniously arranged?"

Principles of Plant Placement
There is no absolute answer, but I have found it useful
to think of the flower border as a series of panels, one
flowing harmoniously into the next, though all but
the most sophisticated viewers (and the gardener)
should not be aware of the divisions but, rather, of the
unified beauty of the whole. For with all art, a certain
slyness is required. So, for example, though each panel
might juxtapose a tall, grassy plant with a spreading,
broad-leafed one, they need not be the same grassy
and broad-leafed plants. One panel might show a
Siberian iris close to a pulmonaria, and the next, a cal-
mgrostis near to a very broad-leafed hardy geranium,
such as G. magnificum. The point, of course, is not
which plants to include but, rather, to think in a way
that will see each segment of the border as at once
alike and different.

Essential Plants for Structure
In every climate and garden, however, there are some
plants that must be considered almost obligatory, not
just as necessary components of the border, but also as
essential structural elements, repeated frequently, not
with mathematical regularity but with an underlying
sense of predictability, and so of order. For much of the
United States, Siberian iris and peonies are the best
eamples of such plants. Most gardeners will grow
them for their sumptuous early summer flowers, espe-
cially as they come in enormous variety, offering some-
thing that is at once the same and different, and thus
satisfying one great compulsion of gardeners—collect-
ing. But in planning the structure of a perennial border,
it is their pattern of growth that is most valuable, for
one is grassy and the other is broad-leafed, and both
will remain in excellent shape for the whole summer.
In most years, they even display attractive autumn
foliage, the Siberian iris turning to butter yellow and
the peony to shades of apple and maple-leaf red. Both
are strong plants, but softer ones may also be included
in the rhythm of the flower border, such as hardy ger-
iums, platycodons, nepetas, and dianthus. Even
annuals, many of which are best sprinkled here and
there, might contribute to a subtle order, as with patch-
es of the opium poppy, Papaver somniferum, for June
flower, or the beautiful pale lilac-blue petunia ‘Azure
Pearls,’ for bloom from early summer to frost.

Achieving Four-Season Interest
Once a satisfying structural rhythm is created in a
flower border, we must then be sure that plantings are
arranged to provide maximum interest from as early
in spring as possible until the heavy snows of early
winter, and even beyond. Spring-blooming bulbs like
scillas and chionodoxas are good for blue, and crocus
for many colors; and likewise, snowdrops should
always be planted beneath the Asian witch hazels,
which will bloom in hazy yellow or orange while the
snowdrops are still turning the bare earth silver
beneath. The earliest tulips will accompany flowering
crab apples, and the latest will be in bloom with the
lilacs and early perennials. From June to frost there
should be a riot of color from perennial plants, though
it will come in peaks, beginning with the border ger-
iums, hardy salvias, early thalictrums, erigerons, and
the like, all punctuated by Siberian iris and peonies.
High summer will be a bounty of yellow daisies and
border phlox, possibly with many daylilies, though
1. Syringa xprestoniae ‘Nocturn’
1A. Syringa xprestoniae ‘Agnes Smith’
2. Syringa vulgaris cultivars
3. Malus sargentii—multi-trunked
4. Large boxwood—loosely mounded—4-5 ft.
5. Antique & shrub roses—tall—5-6 ft.
6. Antique & shrub roses—medium—3-4 ft.
7. Siberian iris—many cultivars
8. Herbaceous peonies—many cultivars
9. Echinops sphaerocephalus
9A. Echinops bannaticus ‘Blue Globe’ and ‘Taplow Blue’ (half and half)
10. Reliably perennial cultivars of dianthus—pink and white
11. Dwarf bearded iris—only shades of blue
12. Stachys byzantina
13. Stachys macrantha
14. Border geraniums—pink and blue
15. Sedum ‘Autumn Joy’
16. Sedum telephium subsp. maximum ‘Atropurpureum’
17. Sedum ‘Vera Jameson’
18. Astilbe chinensis ‘Pumila’
19. Mat-forming asters—Prof. Kippenburg type
20. Aster ‘Little Carlow’
21. Aster cordifolius ‘Silver Spray’
22. Aster amellus ‘Violet Queen’
23. Aster novae-angliae—soft shades, tall cultivars—but in variety
24. Aster novi-belgii—medium height, in variety
25. Eupatorium fistulosum ‘Gateway’
26. Phlox paniculata—in variety, but soft shades
27. Monarda—soft shades
28. Hemerocallis in variety—but earliest spring blooming
29. Miscanthus sinensis ‘Gracillimus’
30. M. s. ‘Silberfeder’
31. M. s. var. purpurascens
32. Mackeya macrorcarpa ‘Kelway’s Coral Plume’
33. Rodgersia pinnata ‘Superba’
34. Bedding plants

they should be planted close to the front of the border so that the tedious job of picking off yesterday’s spent blooms can be done easily. Autumn should bring jocose weed, hardy chrysanthemums, and the beautiful native asters, both generally cultivated and wild-collected. In very late autumn there should be sprinklings of autumn crocus, particularly the violet Crocus sativus and C. speciosus, along with whatever other ones might be hardy, and the clear pink goblets of plenty of colchicums are indispensable, especially as they are surprisingly shade tolerant and so can be tucked in partially shaded spots. True winter should at least show the scarlet stems of Cornus alba ‘Siberica’, red-berried sprays of the deciduous holly, Ilex verticillata, and, in the odd warm spell of January, the sweetly fragrant umbels of Viburnum × bodnantense. The Asian witch hazels will quickly follow, and the floral year, never quite over except in the very coldest places, will begin again.

Remember the Three D's

Good gardeners almost instinctively think of their borders in terms of three D's: **Depth**, **Density**, and **Diversity**. Depth is not merely the amount of footage from front to back. It is also the creation of a layered effect—never, to be sure, “short, medium, and tall,” but rather a complex interplay of heights through which the eye wanders, as at the edge of a forest that meets a field. Density is a satisfying mass of plants, one thick and rich enough to make a viewer think he could stand there forever, just looking. Diversity attempts to include as many beautiful plants as possible—for flower, foliage, leaf, twig, or berry, offering visual delight for as many calendar months as can be. But to these one might add another D, the stern word Discipline. For always, we aim for a garden that is not merely a collection of pretty flowers, and still less a nursery of them waiting to be organized, but rather a picture that has been composed, and that—if we are very stern with ourselves—can always be made better. ‘∀’