

# **TLC for Perennials in Oklahoma**

Taking care of perennials or providing them with “tender loving care” (TLC), is essential to ensure their longevity, health, and vibrancy. Since perennials live for multiple years and often experience cycles of blooming and dormancy, understanding how to care for them year-round is crucial. In Oklahoma, where seasonal changes can be extreme, following best practices for perennial care can make a significant difference. This guide offers an overview of TLC for perennials, covering soil preparation, watering, mulching, pruning, pest management, and winter protection.

## **1. Soil Preparation and Fertilization**

The foundation of a healthy perennial garden lies in the soil. For perennials to thrive, soil should be well-draining and rich in organic matter. Oklahoma soils can be quite varied but often have high clay content, which can lead to drainage issues. According to Oklahoma Proven, amending clay soils with compost or well-rotted manure improves drainage and provides necessary nutrients. Organic matter helps loosen the soil, creating a more hospitable environment for root growth.

When it comes to fertilizing, it is best to do so in the early spring as new growth begins, using a balanced, slow-release fertilizer. Avoid over-fertilizing, as this can lead to lush foliage at the expense of blooms. Some perennials, such as native plants that are part of the Oklahoma Proven Plant Selections, may not require additional fertilization if they are planted in nutrient-rich soil.

## **2. Watering Wisely**

Watering perennials properly is one of the most crucial aspects of their care. Perennials need consistent moisture, especially during their first year as they establish their root systems. According to the Oklahoma Proven program, perennials should receive about an inch of water per week. However, this may vary depending on the specific plant, soil type, and weather conditions.

A good rule of thumb is to water deeply but infrequently, allowing moisture to reach deeper into the soil, encouraging roots to grow downward. Shallow watering can lead to weaker root systems and increase the plants' susceptibility to drought stress. For areas prone to dry spells, drought-tolerant perennials such as black-eyed Susan (*Rudbeckia*) and purple coneflower (*Echinacea*) are ideal as they can withstand periods of limited water.

### **3. Mulching for Moisture Retention and Weed Control**

Mulching is an important part of perennial care, helping to retain soil moisture, regulate soil temperature, and suppress weeds. A 2–3” layer of organic mulch, such as shredded bark or compost, can provide these benefits and break down over time, adding nutrients back into the soil. Mulch is particularly helpful in Oklahoma, where summer heat can cause soil moisture to evaporate quickly.

It is essential to keep mulch from directly touching the base of the plant stems in order to prevent rot and to discourage pests. Mulching in the fall also provides an insulating layer that helps protect plant roots during winter freezes and thaws.

### **4. Pruning and Deadheading**

Regular pruning and deadheading are essential for maintaining the appearance and health of perennials. Deadheading, or removing spent flowers, encourages many perennials to produce more blooms. Plants like coreopsis, coneflowers, and salvias respond well to this practice, extending their blooming period throughout the growing season.

Pruning is also necessary to remove any dead or damaged stems, which can attract pests and diseases. For some perennials, such as ornamental grasses or sedums, leaving the spent foliage and seed heads through the winter adds visual interest to the garden and provides food and shelter for wildlife. Pruning can then be done in early spring as new growth appears, cutting back to healthy foliage or stems.

## **5. Pest and Disease Management**

Keeping perennials healthy involves staying ahead of pests and diseases. Oklahoma's climate can be conducive to a variety of garden pests, such as aphids, spider mites, and caterpillars. Monitoring plants regularly is key, as early detection makes management easier. One of the primary recommendations from Oklahoma Proven is to encourage beneficial insects, such as ladybugs and lacewings, which naturally control many pest populations.

For diseases, prevention is often the best approach. Ensure that plants have adequate airflow by spacing them properly, as overcrowded plants are more prone to fungal diseases. Watering at the base of the plant rather than from above can help keep leaves dry, reducing the risk of powdery mildew and other fungal infections. If diseases do occur, removing affected foliage and practicing good sanitation (like cleaning tools between uses) can prevent the spread.

## **6. Preparing for Winter**

Winter protection is essential for perennials, especially in areas where temperatures fluctuate or drop dramatically. Many perennials enter a period of dormancy in winter, conserving energy for new growth in spring. To help them survive this period, adding an extra layer of mulch in late fall provides insulation for the roots against cold snaps.

Some of the more tender perennials may benefit from additional protection, such as covering with burlap or frost blankets during extreme cold. Removing this protection in early spring allows plants to warm up naturally as temperatures rise.

## **7. Dividing and Transplanting**

Perennials often benefit from being divided every few years, which encourages healthier growth and can increase bloom production. Plants like daylilies, hostas, and irises are good candidates for division, which helps prevent overcrowding and gives them more space to thrive. Fall is an ideal

time to divide perennials, as cooler weather allows roots to establish with less stress.

To divide, dig up the plant carefully, separate the root clumps, and replant them at the same depth in well-prepared soil. Water thoroughly after transplanting to help the new divisions settle in.

## **Conclusion**

Providing TLC for perennials is a year-round endeavor that can pay off with vibrant blooms, lush foliage, and a resilient garden. By following best practices in soil preparation, watering, mulching, pruning, and pest management, Oklahoma gardeners can help their perennials thrive. The Oklahoma Proven program offers valuable guidance on selecting and caring for plants that are well-suited to the region, making it easier for gardeners to create beautiful and sustainable landscapes that will endure through the seasons.

## **References**

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