

Perennials 101

How to Grow Perennials Successfully in Colorado Without the Fuss



Soil Preparation

Colorado is known for its mix of soil types, most commonly dense clay, but some areas also have sandy or mixed soils. Clay heavy soil is slow to drain and easily compacted, while sandy soil drains too quickly and lacks organic structure. Fortunately, both can be improved with compost.

Why compost matters:

- Acts as a natural clay buster by improving aeration and drainage
- Adds organic matter and microbial life
- Helps transition roots from rich potting mix to native soil

Amendment Ratios:

- Clay soil: 1 part compost to 3 parts native soil
- Sandy soil: 1 part compost to 1 part native soil

Use a 5-gallon bucket or wheelbarrow to mix compost and native soil before backfilling. Compost-enriched soil encourages deeper, healthier roots and better moisture balance.

Avoid weed fabric:

While common, it prevents healthy soil biology from developing by compacting soil and restricting air and moisture movement. Over time, roots hit the fabric barrier and begin to fail.

If your bed has weed fabric:

- Cut and remove as much as possible before planting
- Do not simply cut a small hole for the pot, roots will stay trapped
- Instead, rebuild healthy soil by removing the barrier and top-dressing with 3-4 inches of bark mulch
- For ongoing weed control, apply a pre-emergent in early spring

Sunlight & Exposure

Colorado's high elevation and thin atmosphere intensify sunlight and UV radiation. This affects how "full sun" and "shade" are defined here compared to other regions.

- Full Sun: 6+ hours of direct light per day

At a Glance

Soil: Amend 1:3 or 1:1 for sandy soil, avoid weed fabric.

Sunlight: Full sun-6+ hours; Part shade 3-6 hours; Full shade <3 hours.

Planting: Dig hole 1.5-2x pot width and depth; add Biotone.

Water: Deep & infrequent; allow top 3-6" of soil to dry.

Winter Watering: Deep-soak monthly on warm days (45°F +)

Fertilizer: Organic slow-release 2-3x per year.

Containers: 18"x18" minimum; winter-water monthly.

Pruning: Cut back in late winter, not fall; deadhead during growing season.

- Part Sun / Part Shade: 3–6 hours of direct light (often ideal as morning sun and afternoon shade)
- Full Shade: Less than 3 hours of direct light or bright indirect light

Morning sun is cooler and gentler, ideal for shade, tender or woodland plants.

Afternoon sun is stronger and hotter, best for drought-tolerant or heat-loving species like salvias, yarrows, and sedums.

Remember, dappled light under trees doesn't count as "hours of sun".

Planting

When planting perennials, the goal is to give roots space to expand into improved soil before hitting the heavier native layer.

Steps:

1. Dig a hole 1.5–2× wider and deeper than the pot.
2. Mix native soil with compost according to the soil type ratios.
3. Add a handful of Espoma Bio-tone Starter Plus to the hole.
 - Bio-tone's small fertilizer content provides gentle nutrients.
 - The mycorrhizae within the formula form beneficial root associations, improving long-term water and nutrient uptake.
4. Place the plant so it sits at the same soil level as in the pot.
5. Backfill with your amended soil mixture and water deeply to settle.

Watering

Watering correctly is one of the most critical aspects of success.

Overwatering, especially in clay soils, is the most common reason new perennials fail.

Because clay holds water tightly, it can suffocate roots if kept constantly wet. Ironically, the symptoms (wilt-ing, yellowing, drooping) often mimic underwatering.

- Water deeply but infrequently. Let water soak past the root ball so roots grow downward in se arch of moisture.
- After planting, water thoroughly for several minutes.
- Check soil moisture daily at first using a moisture meter or by hand.
- Don't water again until the top 3–6 inches of soil is dry.
- After several cycles, you'll develop a consistent schedule based on your garden's conditions.

Mulching with bark helps reduce surface evaporation, moderates soil temperature, and supports beneficial organisms.

Once established (2–3 years):

- Most perennials require far less water—often only weekly to biweekly depending on species, weather, exposure, and soil type.

Winter watering:

Colorado's dry winters mean roots can dehydrate even when plants are dormant.

- Water deeply once a month from November through March, on days above 45°F.
- Snowfall alone doesn't provide enough moisture since it's usually low in water content along the front range.

- This monthly deep drink greatly improves overwintering and spring vigor

Fertilizing

Healthy soil is more important than heavy feeding, but perennials do appreciate regular nutrients especially as they get older and use up available resources.

At planting: Use Espoma Bio-tone to establish a strong root system and microbial balance. This will also aid in faster establishment and uptake of unreachable nutrients.

During the season:

- Use Espoma Rose-tone or Gro-Rich Rose & Perennial Food 2-3 times per year (spring, early summer, mid-summer).
- These organic fertilizers feed slowly and improve soil health over time.
- Always water well after applying fertilizer.
- Avoid fertilizing stressed plants, let them recover first to prevent burn or shock.

Perennials in Containers

Perennials thrive in containers if given proper space, soil, and winter care.

- Choose a large pot (18"x18" or larger) to reduce root binding, drying/overwatering, and protect from temperature swings.
- Select a frost-proof container and select plants rated one USDA zone hardier than your area.
- Mix perennials and annuals for a long-lasting display.
- Overwinter in an unheated garage or sheltered area if possible.
- Winter water monthly to keep soil from drying completely.
- Fertilize once a month, May through August, with a liquid or granular feed.

Pruning & Maintenance

Most perennials benefit from being cut back in late winter or early spring, not in fall. Leaving stems through winter protects crowns from cold and supports overwintering pollinators. Some perennials, like grasses, despite being dried out have some ornamental winter interest if left untouched.

- Cut back to ground level or 4-6" above soil.
- Deadhead during the growing season to maintain appearance and, in many species (salvia, penstemon, yarrow, etc.), encourage repeat blooms.
- A few exceptions, like wisteria and tree peonies, have specific pruning needs, so check signage or ask garden advisors for more details.