



Annie Hayes

How to have a Fabby Garden... Part VI

I REALLY love it when perennials live up to my expectations, last for at least several years and *don't die* – don't you? Here at the nursery, when we get all excited about a new plant we've raised from seeds or cuttings, the first thing we do is plant it in several places in the garden and a few sample pots. **What we want to find out is this: will this new variety live through the Winter and bloom for a second season?** Here in our mild and rainy Winter climate, this is a common reason why a perennial fails to thrive.

I find that so many modern, newly introduced "perennials" out there in the garden market just don't meet our mild-Winter test. Or they are wimpy new varieties quickly sent out into the marketplace (pumped up on fertilizers) to look extra bloomy in a 4" pot or gallon – the better for quick nursery sales! The thing is, I don't believe anyone really tests them to see if they truly behave as perennials in all the diverse zoneage of the U.S.! So we buy them because they are *sooo* pretty and then find that they turn smoochy in the Winter or completely disappear. Our "gardener's hope" kicks in and we tell ourselves, "Oh, it's just being deciduous at the moment. It will

return soon." By July, we're feeling totally guilty, thinking we didn't give our new baby what it needed. "It's my fault and I'm a crummy gardener!" Well, I'm here to say "No you're not! It was a crummy-wimpy plant (or not happy with our Mediterranean climate) and **you are an excellent gardener!**"

Here's an example: This past year I was told by more than a few visitors, including a garden designer, that they won't even try to plant one of my all time favorite cottagey perennials. They tell me: "Dianthus are just annuals with a really short bloom season and they always die!" Hmmm. Dianthus? Annuals? How sad! Where did you buy them, I asked? Oh, at the "box store." Well, there you go! Those are *Dianthus chinensis* (sold as *perennials*) that really behave as annuals in the ground. The thing is, these Dianthus are so highly available and bloom so massively in a 4" pot that box store "garden centers" and their suppliers much prefer them for quick sales. Sadly, it's become harder to find the true, and in my opinion, far superior, truly perennial species at your local nursery and well, out-of-sight is garden memory oblivion for these wonderful, rewarding and highly fragrant plants!



Dianthus superbus

Just look at the amazing *Dianthus* on page 17. THAT is what a real Dianthus looks like to me! These perennial species live for years in my garden. I don't know how long they bloom in hotter climates but I do know they bloom Spring thru Fall here. My favorite, longest lived types are *D. plumarius*, *carthusianorum* and *gratianopolitanus*. **And this is what you should know:** Dianthus love really good drainage, so add in some lava rock or better, plant them on the edge of your bed or on a slope. They are not fond of clay but love a little compost. Just a month or two after planting, they'll burst into a stunning mass of flowers that lasts for months, especially if you cut off spent blooms. In Summer, they'll go into a rest period unless you cut them back and give them a bit of compost around the base, whereupon they'll burst forth with all those glorious blooms again! When they finish blooming at the end of Fall, you want to *ruthlessly cut back the foliage and stems* to no more than 3" tall and 10" across. Don't worry – they'll love you for it. In early Spring, give them a 1" dressing of good quality compost and they'll return more beautiful than before. With proper care your **Dianthus will live for years.**

Last year, while perusing Ebay, I bought some wonderful old mailorder catalogs (circa 1890–1930) that listed more than a hundred fascinating varieties of *Dianthus*, including vividly striped and polka-dotted "Carnations." Sadly, almost all have been entirely lost to garden extinction. 'Chomley Farran' (p. 3) is reminiscent of these heirlooms that old time "florists" worked so hard to create. I felt so sad after reading about them, I began to worry that some of the varieties we now grow would face eventual disappearance as well. For example, look at this fabulous *Dianthus superbus* (top, left). When we ordered seed for it over the past few years, we received a totally wrong variety. Certainly NOT the lovely, deliciously scented and long lived species we were familiar with. In fact, it turned out to be an *unscented annual* often called "Rainbow Loveliness," which is now being sold as the original perennial species. Luckily, our wonderful long-time propagator, Anni Jensen, still had one of our original mother plants stashed in a corner of the nursery. We now collect our own seed and feel confident we will be able to offer it again in the future.

Another wonderful long lived perennial that seems to have lost its mojo to modern "improvements" is *Aquilegia vulgaris* or the common garden "Columbine." Formerly 3' tall x 2' wide, they seem to have shrunk in both size and vigor.

I could blather on about all the depressing details but suffice it say, we're working on it! In the meantime, I highly recommend *Aquilegia chrysantha*, *caerulea* and *caerulea* 'Krystal' (online and p. 5) as absolutely fabulous Columbines. Properly tall and highly floriferous with large, scented flowers, they're certainly the longest blooming, too. Almost to mid-Summer! And if you cut them back to 2" tall after bloom, you'll often get a second flowering in Fall! Happily, they return reliably each Spring and also self-sow! **Real perennials. YAY!**

Annie



Dianthus 'Purpleton' living on the edge.



Aquilegia caerulea: Unmolested reliable fabbiness.



Beloved perennial favorites: Pee-wee and *Aquilegia caerulea* 'Krystal.'