

The Not-So Perennial Garden

Perennials have reigned supreme over the last few decades with shelves of books devoted to their history and culture, illustrated with downright rapturous photographs. A border of perennial plants was a consummation devoutly to be planned, planted, watered, weeded and admired. One of the problems with this garden of perfection was that the gardener had no time to admire, totally consumed with the weeding, dividing, replanting.

One of the challenges was having something in bloom throughout spring, summer and fall. However, it is annuals, knowing that they have but one life to live, that bloom their hearts out non-stop. Perennials will give you a secondary show, if you are prompt in dead-heading them. Science has provided us with repeat blooming iris and daylilies but they are often less enthusiastic performers the second time around.

Some are more steadfast. Coreopsis and rudbeckias spread generously over the years determined to be perennial, as do lilies but others are social butterflies. The clump of beebalm is no longer a clump. It is holding brief conversations from one end of the garden to the other. Chrysanthemums spread congenially within their allotted spaced. These are the single-flowered ones that blend with fall asters and grasses so comfortably, not the large cupcakes that bloom, sag, and vanish.

The only lawn grass I have is by accident so the grubs that dine on grassroots have diminished, thereby encouraging the voles and moles to leave. That means there is the possibility to have hostas again. Those that were planted in protecting buckets are so pitiful I doubt even if replanted they would flourish. I'll think about it.

A neat book, "The Roots of My Obsession" is a collection of 30 essays by gardeners explaining why they garden. It is edited by writer and editor Thomas C. Cooper. One line in an essay, "Island Life" by Ken Druse has delivered me from the flower failure doldrums. "I think about a quarter of the perennials I've bought over the years turned out to be annuals." Ken Druse is a leading voice for natural gardening as well as author, lecturer, and gifted gardener and in his essay he describes the effects of the 'new norm' – heat, floods, storms, - on his island garden.

You may notice in your own garden that some of your favorite flowers are those that simply appeared. I have several clumps of butterfly weed, *Asclepias tuberosa*, here and there. I have never planted one but probably they can be successfully transplanted if they are moved when they are very small since they develop a deep taproot that resents being disturbed. Butterfly weed is a magnet for zebra swallowtails: the black and white fluttering among the orange blooms a delight.

If you have Pawpaws in your neighborhood, *Asimina* spp., to host their caterpillars, you will have these elegant butterflies. Butterflies are species specific when it comes to feeding the egg, larvae (caterpillar) and pupa (chrysalis) and that explains why I no longer see clouds of gold and black tiger swallowtails. 'Isobel' and 'Irene' dispatched the tulip trees, *Liriodendron tulipifera*, that were on my property, host plant for this Virginia state butterfly.

One of the butterfly's favorite nectar plants is the tall purple-topped *Verbena bonariensis*. I used to have volunteers of it in and around other plantings: this year the only healthy stand springs from a paving joint in the driveway. I will leave it there hoping the eventual seeds will find their way to more appropriate lodgings.

Speaking of seeds, I sprinkled a few marigold and zinnia seeds that had been hanging around for years on the surface of a 15-inch diameter pot. After the real leaves appeared I noticed

that they resembled neither marigolds nor zinnias and it was soon apparent that some of them were petunias. Made me wonder if deep blue petunias were in that pot last summer or the summer before? Soon they were joined by a bright red verbena. That was a former July's small salute to the flag. And because of the vagaries of hybridization, one of the volunteer verbenas is white, nice.

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