

Introduction to Perennial Plants

Nature does not hurry, yet everything is accomplished.
-Lao Tzu

What are Perennial Plants?

Perennial plants are plants that last two or more seasons. Perennial plantings serve as a foundation for your school garden and can have various purposes such as:

- ❖ attracting wildlife and providing habitat for beneficial insects (pollinators and predators) both of which connect to science content
- ❖ food production (herbs, fruit trees, shrubs, and vines)
- ❖ medicinal uses (teas, tinctures, salves, and balms)
- ❖ ornamental uses (dried floral crafts, cut flowers)
- ❖ providing year round color and foliage
- ❖ providing year round plant material for studying and projects

Perennial plants are usually easier to maintain than annual vegetable crops and, once planted, perennials provide a place of beauty and interest for years to come.

There are many considerations to take into account when selecting perennials:

- ❖ Evergreen vs. deciduous: Do you want a plant that stays green all year or one that drops its leaves in winter?
- ❖ Flowering/fruiting months and colors: It makes most sense to choose plants that will fruit or flower when school is in session.
- ❖ Size and structure: Will the mature size of the plant fit properly in the space available?
- ❖ Uses of plants: Will they be for culinary herbs, ornamental uses, medicinal uses, habitat, food production, special theme or study purposes?
- ❖ Light requirements: Will the plant receive the appropriate amount of light throughout the year?
- ❖ Appropriate climatic zones: Will the plant survive your winter cold?

Climate Zones for Perennial Plants

To determine which plants are suitable for a climate zone, gardeners refer to hardiness charts or “climate zones.” There are two zone charts that are commonly used in the western region:

- ❖ USDA Zones
- ❖ Sunset Western Garden Zones

The USDA Zones range from 1-13, with **1** being the coldest and **11** being the warmest. In California most locations fall between zones **7-10**.

The Sunset Garden Zones are similar to the USDA Zones, but are more detailed allowing for a more specific match of a plant's ideal environmental preferences and a location's climate. There are 24 Sunset zones and the *Sunset Western Garden Book* is an indispensable resource that lists thousands of plants, their zones and growing information for the Western US.

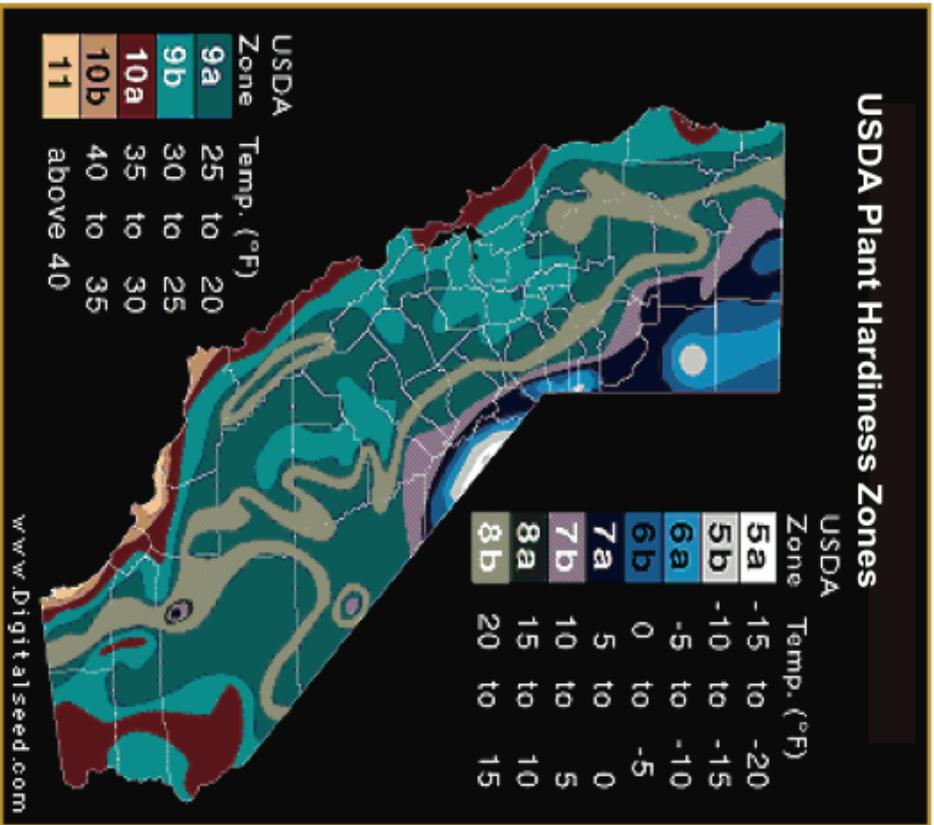
To determine your specific zone, ask a local nursery professional, contact your County Master Gardener (www.mastergardeners.org), or view the "Know Your Zone" maps on the following page. To find out what zone a particular plant will thrive in, refer to the plant label, your nursery professional, or a resource such as the *Sunset Western Garden Book*.

Here are a few more points to consider when planting perennials:

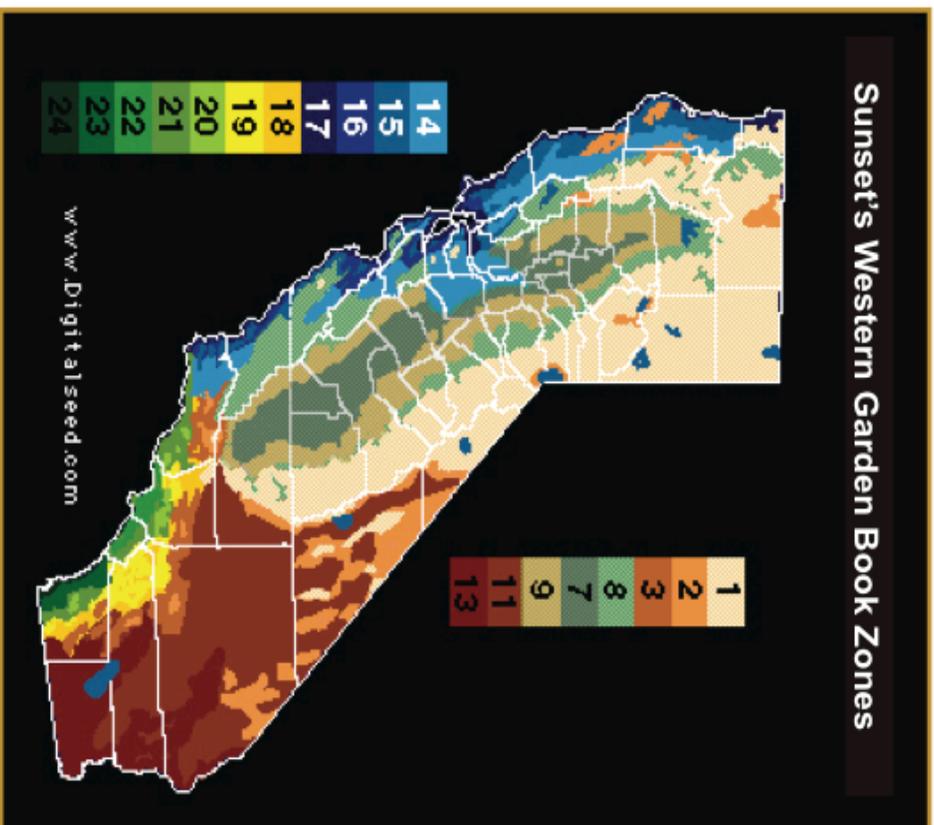
- ❖ “Herbaceous” perennial plants die back to the ground in the winter and re-grow in the spring. “Woody” plants maintain their branching structure during the winter and may be evergreen or deciduous. “Evergreen” perennials keep their leaves during the winter. Keep these characteristics in mind when planning your garden's design.
- ❖ Evergreen perennials can be planted any time of the year, but often the best time of year is in the fall. This allows plants root systems to get established before their growing season and to take advantage of winter rains.
- ❖ Bare root perennials such as fruit trees and vines should be planted in the dormant season (winter or late winter months if your ground is frozen).
- ❖ Most bulbs are planted in the fall for spring blooming dates; they are a great option for school gardens.

Know Your Zone

Cold tolerance or “plant hardiness” is an important consideration when selecting plant varieties for your garden. There are two commonly used climate zones used to gauge temperatures in a particular area. The USDA has established plant hardiness zones for the country. When selecting plants it is important that the plant is suitable for your zone. Zone information for plants can often be found on plant labels or from nursery staff. Sunset’s Western Garden Book has created their own zone. Keep that in mind when using their books in garden planning.



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