

Plant for a Lifetime of Memories

By Rachel Oppedahl

Going through an old box of photos of my childhood home the other day, I noticed that several beloved bushes appeared somewhere in the background in most of them. From the time I was a toddler until I left home at 18, there was that fragrant purple lilac at the back fence, the blue hydrangeas under my parent's bedroom window, and a huge rose bush with large, pink, blousy flowers that nodded from the weight of their many petals. I'd guess you have memories, too, of garden plants that traveled with you through the decades.



Lilac (*Syringa*)

It's officially spring, and while I'd never try to talk you out of bringing home flats of those annual wonders you have to replace every year, I'd like to make the case for also including long-lived, flowering perennials that keep coming back on their own for tens, sometimes hundreds of years (we should live so long).

Here's a short list of flowering perennials that typically live at least 20 years if sited and cared for properly. They are either woody, deciduous plants or those that die back to the ground in winter and reemerge from the underground "mother" plant every year.

Lilac (*Syringa*). With their unforgettable scent and beauty, some varieties of lilac have been known to live 100-plus years. Native to the Balkans, lilacs were introduced to the American colonies in the 18th century. There are bush and tree lilacs, their heights ranging from six to 20 feet. The conical, clustered blooms typically last only a few weeks, but what a show! Lilacs prefer slightly alkaline soil, regular watering and full sun, although in the foothills, most varieties will appreciate partial shade in the hottest part of the day. While these fragrant beauties are extremely long-lived, they are also slow to start. If you buy a lilac slip, it might be five to ten years before it blooms (mine took seven).

Peony (*Paeonia*). If you'd like to have a small, mounding bush with flowers that rival roses, one that deer won't eat (honest, mine are 20 years old), and that are rarely bothered by pests, this is your plant. Most garden peonies are descended from Chinese species, and are either small herbaceous bushes or trees to six feet tall. The color range is stunning and some have a lovely fragrance. Like lilacs, peonies do best in regions that experience a cold enough winter for full dormancy. They are also extremely long lived, from 70 to 100 years. The one tricky thing about peonies is planting. If they are planted too deeply, they will usually refuse to flower, so read the instructions.



Coneflower (Echinacea)

Coneflower (*Echinacea*). This North American native is a garden staple for anyone who wants a hardy, long-blooming, drought-tolerant perennial that the bees and butterflies love. Coneflowers have been known to live for 20 years, so while its longevity isn't as impressive as lilacs or peonies, it still lives much longer than many (especially non-native) garden bedding plants. And lately, with the growing interest in drought-tolerant natives, hybridizers have introduced a dizzying number of colors and petal forms. Coneflowers are not fussy about soil and typically grow to a height of about three to four feet.

Sage (*Salvia*). Belonging to the mint family, there are hundreds of species of salvia. While most have that wonderful sage scent, only a few are used for culinary purposes. Native to the Southwestern U.S. and Northern Mexico, salvias are beloved for their frequently summer-long bloom and drought tolerance. The color of their blooms runs the gamut from white, yellow, pink, red, to purple. Their longevity varies by species and variety, but I can attest to long life in these three, which I planted 20 years ago: *S. microphylla*, "Hot Lips"; *S. chamaedryoides*, "Germander Sage"; and *S. clevelandii*, "Allen Chickering."

While a bush that lives for 20 or 100 years is admirable, plants that will give you pleasure for five to 10 years shouldn't get short shrift. Here are a few: daylilies, hosta, wild geranium, Russian sage, many sedums, hydrangea and iris.

So, happy planting. May some of your garden choices turn out to be old friends that stay close through the years.

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