



by Carol Seminara, HCMG

## To Live and Die in the Garden

Life in the garden is basic. It's all about living organisms following the hierarchy of biological imperative to perpetuate their existence. Everything out there is busy working to survive and that includes . . . making babies. Bugs do it, weeds do it, even grandma's dainty cosmos do it. Flowers are pretty much nothing more than a plant fulfilling its need to reproduce before it shuffles off its mortal coil.

It's how long that circle of life lasts that's important, and that brings us to the difference between annuals, biennials and perennials.

Annuals are plants that complete their life cycle in just one season: from seed germination through growth, flowering, seed production and death. Because they are called annuals does not mean these plants stick around for a whole 12-month span, but we still talk about them in terms of years for convenience.

There are warm-season annuals and cool-season annuals. Examples of warm-season annuals include what we think of as the summer stand-bys like marigolds, zinnias and several of our native wildflowers. Pansies, dianthus and snapdragons are probably the most common cold-hardy annuals cultivated in the Texas Hill Country.

Biennial plants complete their life cycle — from seed to maturity — in two growing seasons. In the first year, the plant is busy developing its root system, stems and leaves. Biennials usually enter a period of dormancy during the cooler months and many require vernalization (cold or even freezing temperatures) to stimulate flower production. The second year, the plant flowers and produces fruits or seeds, then dies.



When stressed by exposure to extreme climate conditions — including prolonged heat — some biennial plants complete their life cycles in a few months rather than two years. Parsley is a biennial. Sadly, this year my parsley bolted (produced seeds prematurely) after only four months, and I've been reluctant to replant until it gets cooler, i.e., less than 100 degrees F.

Perennials are plants that live for several — at least more than two — years. That's the very definition of perennial: lasting or existing for a long or apparently infinite time. Generally we apply this term to herbaceous plants, although woody plants such as shrubs and trees are perennial, or so we hope, in their growth habit.

Perennials can be deciduous or evergreen, and they follow a similar growth pattern as biennials: producing flowers in their second season. You've probably heard the adage about perennials: first they sleep, then they creep, then they leap.

When perennials go dormant each winter, they store their energy in the roots, thus new growth or re-growth comes from their root-stock rather than seeds. Perennials, especially native ones, are the mainstay of any year-round, sustainable landscape. The classic English cottage-style garden relies on perennial flower borders for structure and continuity.

The native *Leucophyllum frutescens* is an evergreen perennial (though the leaves are grey) with lavender blooms. You may know it by one of its many common names — Texas sage, Cenizo, Purple sage, Texas ranger, Texas barometer bush, Texas silverleaf.

Now here's where it can get a little confusing. Some biennials — beets, carrots, lettuces — are grown as annuals for their edible roots or leaves. And some annuals growing under extremely favorable conditions generate such successful seed propagation in the garden that they look like biennials or perennials (the aforementioned dianthus can sometimes survive a mild winter here).

Then there are the perennials that just can't take the cold; these are called tender perennials and include favorites like dusty miller, verbena and some varieties of salvia (such as mealy cup sage). Extension horticulturist Jerry Parsons coined the term "perennials" to describe perennial flowers that are used as annuals.

All plants — annuals, biennials and perennials — benefit from proper soil preparation and planting. Annuals generally require adequate fertilization, regular deep watering, and routine deadheading (removal of dying flowers).

While they are long-lived, perennials can not be merely planted and then forgotten. Even natives that are well adapted to our challenging soil and those that are drought resistant and/or drought tolerant need adequate and consistent watering their first year to establish strong root systems.

There's plenty of room and reason in the garden for both annuals and perennials; it doesn't have to be one or the other, all or nothing. I find the best recipe for a successful flower garden is to fill it up with plants you like, that do well for you and don't be afraid to try something new.