

## Perennial Maintenance for Beginners

by Cass Turnbull

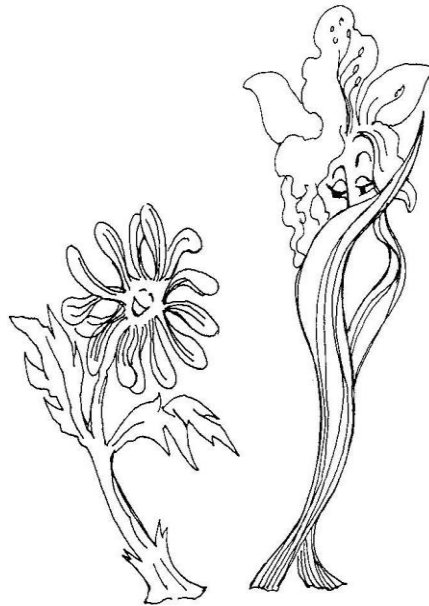
*(This article first appeared in the Arboretum Bulletin.)*

I'm certainly no expert on perennials. About the time I was going to sign up for the perennials class at Horticulture School, I started PlantAmnesty and was dragged into the trees instead. Nevertheless, as a working maintenance gardener, I've spent several years knocking around in other people's perennial beds, or more accurately in their "mixed borders" (in addition to perennials, "mixed borders" contain shrubs, sub-shrubs, self-seeding annuals, silk flowers, lounging cats, gazing globes and anything else that might make things look better for a longer period of time).

Last year I took on a client so utterly naïve in the subject (he had just acquired a new home and garden) that I realized I could act as a coach to the very new. In fact, I don't consider myself an expert in gardening, or pruning for that matter. But I may be a specialist in helping people who are new to the subject. Yeah, that's it. I'm a perpetual beginner put on earth to explain to the neophyte that which is obvious to the initiated.

### **What is a perennial?**

First off, how about a definition of "perennial"? I remember asking my mentor this question and getting a little lecture on the life cycles of perennial flowers vs. annuals. What I really needed to know was that annuals (things like petunias, marigolds and impatiens) are bought in the nursery in spring, planted in the ground or in pots where they grow up in a month and bloom their heads off continually until frost, at which time you yank them out and throw them away. Planting your first pot of annuals is very gratifying and the cause of many people getting hooked on gardening. Perennials, on the other hand, get planted and live in their bed forever, dying back to ground in the winter and returning in the spring. But they usually bloom for a short period of time, short meaning a month or two. The number of satisfactory flowering annuals seems pretty limited, but the number of perennials is almost infinite, making perennial bed gardening more "challenging" (a term all gardeners know, is code for "difficult and rewarding"). Annuals are, in the great unspoken horticultural hierarchy, a lesser class of plants than perennials. They had almost dropped off the list of desirable plants when the "coleus and New Zealand flax" revolution blew the lid off of planting in pots. We are having fun in pots once again, impressing each other with wild and wonderful combinations that last all season long.



*Annual and Perennial*

## **Maintaining perennial beds**

But back to your perennial bed. First you need to know that when you see that magazine photo or visit that garden—all glorious in its abundance of foliage and flowers—you are seeing it at its peak. For half of the year, our winter, it's mostly gone! And behind the scenes is an incredible amount of work—staking, grooming, relocation, staking, division, weeding, baiting, grooming, cutting back and staking. Did I mention staking? But making and tending perennial beds is, after all, a horticultural addiction of the highest order. And if you came back to that same garden three years later you would see something wholly different. I often tell people that making a garden is more like riding a horse than building a table. Gardens keep moving and changing as the plants grow up. It's an ongoing process, not something to be finished. Beds get larger, some plants get shaded out, and the garden must be weeded, mulched and adjusted regularly. Perennial bed maintenance is more like riding wild horses, standing up on their backs, without saddles, while they jump fences and streams, at night.

The old saying for perennials is, “The first year they sleep, the second year they creep and the third year they leap.”

What they don't tell you is that “the fourth year they leap, and the fifth year they leap, and the sixth...” They crowd into their neighbors, shade out rhodies and conifers, show up inside other plants or in other areas of the yard. (I've often thought someone should develop a sort of

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“Richter Scale” for perennials, assigning a number to the relative aggressiveness in growth and inability to be controlled or removed.)

Or, alternatively perennials may die a slow, sickly death. And some perennials develop holes in the center, and some stop blooming unless you divide them. Many are slug magnets. And some have to be deadheaded, and some get mildew. Did I mention staking? Perennials need a lot of attention, generally speaking. The good news is that most perennials are really tough. They are, in fact, the masochists of the plant world. Most want to be dug up and torn apart. They like it. You can walk all over them if you like.



*First Year Sleep*



*Second Year Creep*



*Third Year Leap*

## Grooming

Perennials are just like people. They look great with practically no care in the springtime of their life, but as time goes on, they require more and more care just to look good.

Usually by summer and certainly by the fall you will be spending a lot of time “grooming”. This is not as delicate an operation as it sounds. You might be using your hedge shears to shear off the spent brown flowers, or you might be shearing or cutting some moth-eaten, browned-out plant to the ground and you will be rewarded with a flush of bright new green growth and sometimes a second flowering. Do you remember how, as you worried some minor blemish or injury as a child, your mother warned “Don’t pick at it! You’ll just make it worse!”? Well, the opposite is true for perennials. Just go in that plant and start tugging on yellowing foliage, picking at brown stuff, raking it with your fingers. You’ll be surprised how much better it looks. It’s really quite gratifying. As the daylilies start to lose it, I’m in there gleefully yanking on the lower foliage, tossing heaps of leaves out to the lawn. And when they get really bad, they get sawn to the ground with a bread knife! Next month up comes a new set of foliage.

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Same is true with browned lady's mantle, leaf-mined, dusty columbines, ragged hardy geraniums, and many others. In fact, whenever a perennial starts to brown out, including bulbs, I go at it with gusto. You don't have to wait until the foliage is totally spent. In fact, I recommend you go at it early. Who can forget the incredible sinking feeling in the pit of your stomach when you put your hand on the slimy foliage of a long-gone hosta? My best advice is, "Cut early and cut often." And always get the brown out. They'll be fine.

Unfortunately, there are some exceptions to the "cut it back at will" rule. I wish these were listed somewhere too. So far, all I have is a mental list of those plants which want to be treated gently. By "gentle" I mean that the following plants need some special care when being transplanted, cut back or mulched: peonies, oriental and Asiatic lilies, grasses, sword ferns, hellebore, epimedium, euphorbia wulfenii, penstemons, poppies, artemesia, delphiniums, and perovskia. I'm hoping you will write to me with more, but only if your knowledge is taken from your personal experience and not from what you've read. I'm certain that the list of "special needs" perennials is—relative to the total number of those used in the garden—a small one. And remember, if you are not killing a few plants every year, you are not learning and growing personally as a gardener.

Books always recommend that you wait till fall or winter or spring to divide and move your perennials. But by then you will have no idea what was wrong with the way things were, or where exactly the plants are. And it will be rainy and cold and you will want to be inside doing other things. I like to move plants around while they are in bloom so I can see how they look. Duh! I tend to scoff at all the correct "timing" advice I hear, until I kill something, that is. Live and learn, or in these cases, kill and learn.

## **Dividing**

The same is true for all that dividing of plants that you are supposed to be doing. Is it really necessary? And does dividing really help your daylily bloom? Or keep your *Sedum spectabilis* 'Autumn Hoorah' from flopping? Or your ornamental grass? Maybe, maybe not. Mostly, I find myself dividing plants because they are getting way too huge. What I can tell you for certain is that dividing is a lot of work. Anyone who has had to divide a Siberian iris (they get dead spot in the middle) will tell you to bring a "jaws of life" to get it out of the ground. Wraslin' root balls, that's what it's all about.

This past fall, after stabbing the dug-up root ball of a large ornamental grass repeatedly with spades, futilely, for a half hour, we finally succeeded by using an axe and pry bar to split it apart. We were exhausted. And we put back less than an eighth of what we started with. Oh, and we had divided the same plant two years previously.

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The best trick I ever learned from reading a magazine (with illustration) was how to use two spading forks, back to back, to pry apart a root-mass. After stomping or hammering the tines into the root mass (dug up), one adjacent to the other, one uses the shoulders of the tools as the fulcrum point. Pushing the handles in opposite directions will magically pry the uncooperative plant apart. Wow! I've only seen dividing be successful in getting plants to blooming on a couple of occasions. Once I attempted to remove an entire patch of crocosmia which the homeowner said no longer bloomed. I did what I thought was a thorough job. Except that the roots of the crocosmia are like a series of pop-beads that separate when you dig them up. And when I had removed 90% of the roots, those corms that had escaped had plenty of room to grow and bloom, which they did next year. In fact, I find that some plants are impossible to remove. When I try to get rid of them, they come back, and some even increase: arum, alstromeria, Scilla non-scripta (the common bluebell), acanthus, calla lily, and lots more, I imagine. It's kind of scary when you think about it. Just because perennials look delicate, doesn't mean they are, and neither is the business of taking care of them. And it's dangerous! I can't tell you how many times I've bent over in a perennial bed to tickle out some covey of shotweed and narrowly missed poking my eye out on a stake. I'm surprised there aren't more one-eyed gardeners.

## Staking



*Modified Picket Fence*

Staking. It's necessary and it's a royal pain. I'm of the opinion that well over half of the perennials commonly in use will flop. That is, they grow up in the spring, get flowers, and fall over onto the ground right before the party. There's always a summer rain that flattens perennial beds all over town.

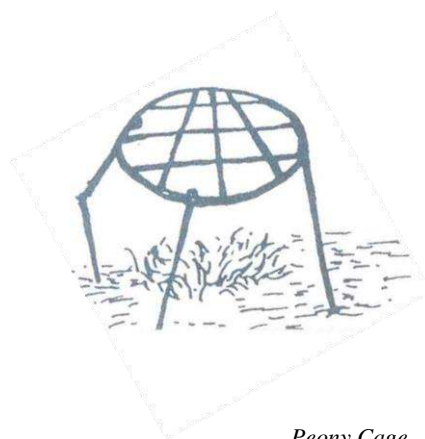
Hearing rain pelt down on a warm June night, I rest smugly knowing that the beds for which I am responsible are supremely prepared. My best advice to you is: "Stake early and stake often".

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In February or March at the latest (the same time you are cutting back the sword ferns and epimedium), get going with the hoops and cages. You have no idea how fast that clock is ticking. Of greatest need is putting hoops over the bleeding hearts—while you are out there, do the peonies. By hoops I mean those egregiously expensive, green, vinyl-clad glorified tomato cages that have cross-hatching on the top. Place them over the plant early enough so the foliage will grow up and through the caging, hiding the hoop, and preventing the otherwise inevitable and heartbreaking flop in coming months. Adjust peony cages upward or add bamboo stakes or T-bars to prevent the even taller stem and its heavy bloom from breaking. As you place the hoop over the crown of the emerging plant, and push the legs down, you may find that one of the wimpy legs bends as it hits a buried pebble. For aesthetics' sake, it may take several re-positionings to get the top part level. These same legs will, in a year or two, fall off altogether. I use zip tie and green coated electrical wire to reattach them. It is time consuming and annoying, but I have not found a better replacement. I dream a lot about inventing a tasteful, durable, adjustable perennial hoop. Hoops are only used for certain plants. Large, spreading, mat-type plants and single stemmers get different treatments.

I have long since given up the common system of string tied between several bamboo stakes corraling, say, Shasta daisies or a clump of irises. Instead I use the “wire fencing roller-coaster” or the “modified bamboo picket fence”. Tying string is way too time-consuming and straight-up bamboo stakes are a hazard. Instead, I use a series of bamboo stakes, ends cut at a slant, and jab them in at angles. One stake goes this way and the next goes that way, crossing the first in an arrangement that looks like a series of X's. Do this around the perimeter and also randomly inside the plant. As a flower stem starts to flop, it leans up against a helpful stake, or it may even rest inside a V-crotch. The stems in the interior of the clump never flop onto their neighbors, reducing the overall weight on the outer ring. I like bamboo because when I am done, I can cut the top parts off at just the right height, hiding them from view.



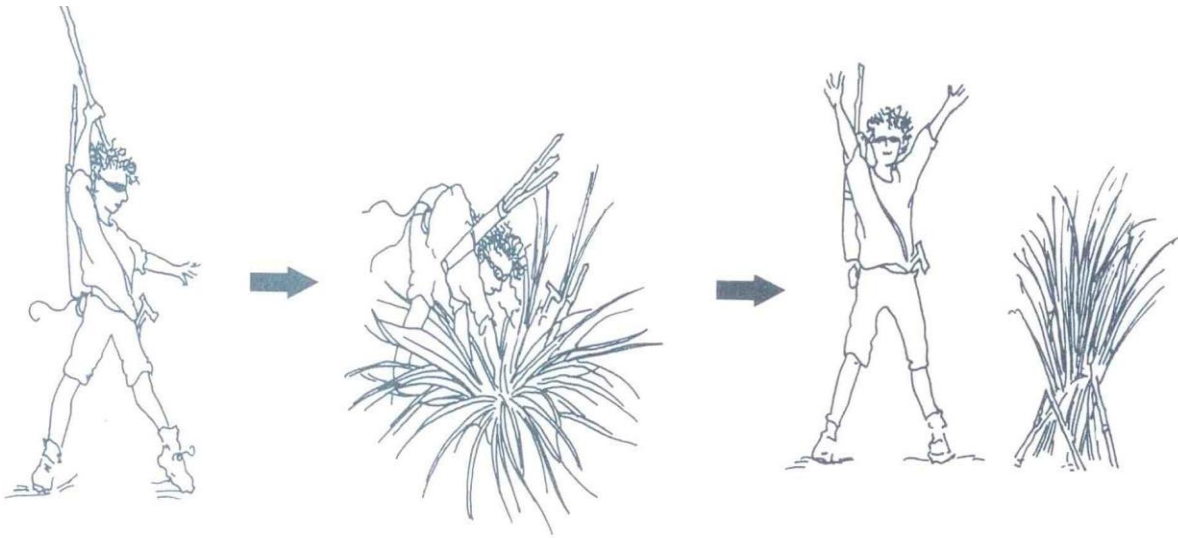
*Peony Cage*

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This staking is best done as soon as the plant grows up, but it is also great for “remedial staking”, which is an art in itself. Once the perennial has flopped (and it happens to the best of us), the temptation is to stand it back upright and give it a straight- in stake and tie. But by then the ends of the stems will have already curved upwards.

When you stand that daisy straight up, its flowers now face backwards. Better to just prop the stems up half way, using bamboo stakes pushed in at a slant. And do it in a series of layers (sort of like the way beauticians foil hair.) This works especially well for Siberian iris. Under-staking at a slant is good for tired lady’s mantles and many other plants.



*Remedial Staking*

I have tried the metal and plastic stakes, but I always come back to bamboo, even though it is only good for a year or two before it rots. And I have trained myself to hit the nurseries early, early, early, before all the good bamboo is gone. Good bamboo is fat and strong, not those flimsy little sticks that snap at the slightest pressure. I load up with several bags of bamboo for the season.

A client of mine had a perennial bed added to her landscape. She claims it was to keep me interested. A year or two later, three giant grasses were added to the back, and they “made” the bed. But because the bed is well-watered, they would fall apart mid- season, splaying all over the place. And so did the echinopsis and the phlox and the shastas. Down came the lupine,

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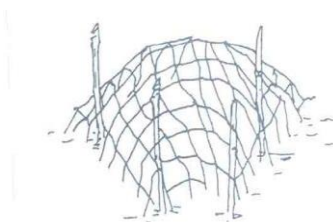
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and out splayed the hardy geraniums, along with the peach leaf bell flowers. Not very nice-looking. Not attractive.

This is how I came to depend on the wire fencing roller coaster system of flop prevention. The grasses were so heavy that they would pull over and/or push up whatever caging I put over them. Now I use real metal fence posts pounded in four corners. Over that I roll out a piece of wire fencing, cut to fit. You can purchase this fencing in rolls, along with the posts and the post pounder (my most borrowed tool), at Lowe's or Home Depot. It looks like chicken wire but the holes are bigger and square, and the wire itself is more substantial. You can sometimes find it in green. I use zip tie (cable tie) to secure the wire "lid" on the top of the 2- or 3-foot posts. Then I attach side pieces so blades don't escape the sides and flop. Almost the entire back border gets this treatment.

Toward the front of the border, where the lower mounding perennials are, I use cut and bowed rectangles of wire fence placed directly on the ground over the emerging plant. The shape of the cut piece is similar to a loaf of bread or, in some cases, the top of a loaf of bread, with bamboo or metal stakes driven in at the corners. Here again the foliage will grow up through the caging, hiding it.

When I am done with the whole caging and hooping business, the bed looks like a madman's miniature roller coaster and amusement park. I'm surprised my customer lets me do it. But soon it will all be covered over with the growing foliage, and the stage will be set and utterly secure for the summer show. This rigging is, as you can well imagine, difficult and hazardous to walk through. Shall we call it "challenging"?



*Bowed Wire Cage/Fence*

I should mention that if you have really enormous beds, spread out over, say, a half-acre of land, you can afford to let many of the floppers flop. Later the growing portions will turn up and grow nicely again. In merry old England, I think I heard they covered the dormant perennial



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beds with the crooked, pruned branches of a quince. They would act as the support; a system with the advantage of being organic and disposable at the end of the year. Could it be rolled up like a rug and tossed out?

What about the single stem type plants? These are things like peach-leaf bell flowers, Asiatic and oriental lilies, and the prima donna of all perennials--the delphinium. In these cases, a single or double stake is used. If you can tell which way your spire may fall, you can use two bamboo stakes crossed in an x, such that the stem rests in the crotch of the crossed stakes. Also, garden stores now sell useful "T-bars": metal stakes with stiff but malleable arms at the top.



*The T-Bar*

Stick the stake in the ground and then wrap the "arms" around the perennial stem. But like their peony cage brethren, T-bars are subject to bent-leg-syndrome. A single bamboo stake, set straight up next to the stem, is perfectly acceptable. And be sure to have a suitable tie material on hand.

Some people prefer jute or string. I am perfectly happy with the too-bright-green spools of twist tie that are sold for such purposes. I attach the spool to my tool belt at the beginning of the day. I especially like the fact that the cutting system is included on the spool. In the future I will be coming out with a line of garden wear that includes camouflage-colored tie, a quiver for bamboo poles, adjustable stakes and hoops. The "perennial tender's" tool belt will have a place for a tiny hammer, wire cutters, zip tie, hand pruner and water bottle.

The lordly delphinium presents the greatest challenge to the perennial bed tender. Its single stakes must be constantly adjusted upward and retied at regular intervals all along the stem. Almost overnight the flower spikes seem to shoot up to well beyond the last tie point. Then the rain comes, or even a tiny breeze, snapping the stems of these, the most wonderful blue flowers in all the world. You wake up to a forest of fallen blooms. Tragic! And yet, the smart

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gardener immediately goes out and brings them indoors for placement in a vase. Call an impromptu luncheon and impress your friends with your extravagant flower arrangement. Whenever you are grooming your perennial beds, remember to cut the floppers and a few others to take indoors.

The annoying chore of staking is only exceeded by the more time-consuming and annoying chore of un-staking at the end of the year. All this stuff has to be disassembled and the dead leaves combed out by the New Year. You can't just leave it up--it would look like heck. And besides, you have to get in there and weed and mulch everything before it all starts growing again, which will be happening sooner every year. Or so it seems.



*Bon Appetit*

## Slug Control

As for pests and diseases in the perennial border, I tend to ignore them. Either the damage is so mild that it can be ignored, or so severe that the plant should be removed altogether. The notable exception is slug damage. (This includes snail damage. Aren't snails just slugs with cuter outfits?). Many of our best perennials are prone to severe slug damage. They love anything with lily-like foliage, soft and slippery—such as daylilies, lily-of-the-valley, alstromeria, red flag, and red hot poker. They also devour many of our shade plants— rodgersia, ligularia, acanthus, petasities, and those ultimate slug magnets—hostas. Several other plants are often forsaken by gardeners because of slug damage— primroses and bergenia (which I think of as slug condominiums) are two examples. But if you can keep on top of the slugs, these plants will become garden-worthy once again. Oh yeah—don't forget to do the delphiniums.

My advice for slug control is: **bait early and bait often**. Yes, I know that methaldehyde, the active ingredient, is a deadly poison.

Always read the label of this and all pesticides, organic or non-organic. I know of a dog that ate a pile of apple-pumice- based slug bait (*Corry's*), got sick and nearly died. It is, I believe, the

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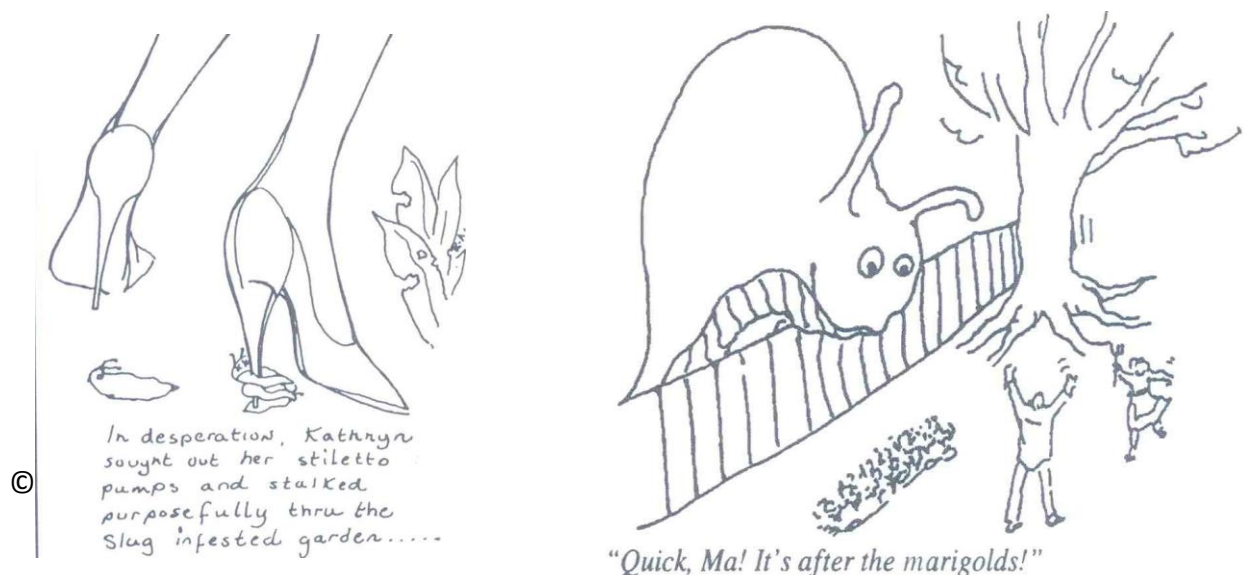
apple base that is attractive to animals. But I also know a lady with many dogs (all still thriving) who has baited with *Corry's* for many years.

*Corry's* needs to be protected from rain or it will lose its effectiveness. People use cottage cheese containers turned upside down with holes punched in the sides (so attractive in the beds, as you can imagine). I have also seen little brown plastic, mushroom-type umbrellas that you stick in the ground over the bait pile. Wish I knew where to get more of those. But I still worry for the animals. Long ago I switched to *Deadline* in a giant squeeze bottle—I must go through five or ten jugs a year. The idea is to squeeze out a line of bait, encircling the plant to be protected.

This looks tacky, and I still worry about pets or birds. So, I prefer just squeezing little puddles of *Deadline* into the center of plants, or under big leaves. Or put it in crevasses between rocks. And under boards and in woodpiles and all the various places that would be hard for an animal to get to, but where our voracious little mollusks love to hide.

There are many organic systems for slug control, and I admire those who use them. The hunt-and-stab at night program is too gross for me, as is the drown-them-in-beer system. I have too many vivid memories of the smell of dissolved slugs in beer bottles from my days with the Parks Department. Some people use diatomaceous earth or copper strips, and what-all-else I do not know. One of the great garden inventions of the past two decades is pet-safe slug bait: *Escargot*. But it is more costly than the other iron-based product I get, which is *Worry-Free* (*Sluggo* is another one). They seem to work pretty well, and I can attest to *Worry-Free's* safety as a friend's dog ate half a box and was just fine. I carry both *Worry-Free* and *Deadline* in my truck.

The main thing about baiting for slugs is to do it *before* the damage shows up, just like staking and so many other things in gardening. As soon as the new year kicks in, I'm out in my own yard being ever so proactive. Hidden in every nook and cranny and under every pot is a nest of pearl-like slug eggs just waiting for the tiniest hint of warm weather to hatch! Every slug you kill now will prevent hundreds later. It's a lot like early weeding. I never leave a customer's yard without making the rounds with my jug of *Deadline*.



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I recommend baiting as often as once every two weeks, squirting a pile about every 20 feet, or wherever favorite slug plants are located. As with most garden maintenance, success is mostly measured by the absence of things that are wrong. But if you adopt obsessive-compulsive gardening habits in staking and baiting, you have every right to expect a beautiful border all year long.

## **The Black Crud**

I feel compelled to say something about *Botrytis* on peonies and about hellebores and what they get (I call it the Black Death). I consider both of these plants to be essential in the garden and they do have serious trouble. Although I have not experienced it myself, I have it on good authority (Carrie Becker of the Bellevue Botanic Garden) that these diseases can be controlled with the application of lime chips (not lime powder), 2 pounds per plant, per year. It is called #7 (size of chips) limestone or marble. It comes in a variety of colors, available locally at Northwest Marble and Stone Manufacturing. I hope that will help.

## **Fertilizer**

And finally, a brief word about fertilizer. Aside from roses, delphiniums and annuals, most perennials don't need to be fertilized if planted in reasonable soil. And since most of the time you are trying to prevent perennials from overtaking each other, my advice is, "Don't bother."