

# Growing Up Fast

Outsize perennials, quick-growing annuals, and some unorthodox strategies to make your garden look mature

Cynthia Gillis

**I**N EARLY MARCH OF 1984 my husband and I signed the lease and moved into our new house, which, amazingly for Brooklyn, New York, came with a 50- by 50-foot yard. By mid-April the bulldozer had left, after completing some modest earth-moving, and by July we threw a housewarming in our lush, colorful, and seemingly mature garden.

Of course our garden wasn't mature, if there is such a thing, but neither did it look as though it had been planted only 12 weeks before. I have found ways to plan and plant a garden so that I don't have to wait several years for it to grow up and lose its just-planted, gawky look. Some simple expedients—shortcuts, if you will—make it possible to have a beautiful garden even during its first season. Because every garden has different conditions and every gardener has different preferences, it's unlikely that all the strategies I describe will be suitable for everyone. Some require extra maintenance and so may be unsuitable for the weekend or casual gardener. Some are relatively expensive initially, while others reduce or delay the cost of establishing a garden. Some are downright unorthodox, going against the grain of gardening maxims about space between young plants and the virtue of patience. Most, however, are simple tricks that make a garden seem established before its time.

For reasons besides the conventional design ones, I begin by drawing an overall long-term plan. One reason is financial. A master plan lets me gauge the ultimate cost of the garden and where I need to save. In addition, it gives me something to aim for, something with which to compare my first-year plantings.

One of the ways I achieve a mature effect in the first season is with temporary plantings that will give way to my ultimate scheme in subsequent years. For example, I might use large perennials such as crambé and *ligularia* where I eventually intend to use

the mass of shrubs. Besides giving me the effect of shrubs quickly, such perennials let me delay and even reduce the expense of the shrubs, because I can buy younger nursery stock and let the perennials fill the gaps until the little shrubs fill out. Naturally, the





*In her desire to cover the ground quickly, the author spaced plants tightly together and put large, bold perennials to work doing the job of slower-growing shrubs. Here plume poppy (left rear) acts as a background shrub for closely spaced masses of (from left, foreground) baby's breath, globe thistle, single hollyhocks, Monarda didyma 'Croftway Pink', and Veronica spicata 'Icicle'.*

more of the final planting I do at the beginning and the less changing and moving later, the better, but my intermediate plantings go a long way to making the garden come into its own quickly.

One way to make a garden seem less bare is to make sure it is less bare—that is, leave no bare ground. And one of the best ways to cover the ground quickly is with trailing annuals. Such plants spill over the edges of paths and walls and climb up rocks and other plants, making the garden look like it's been there awhile. Besides being among my favorite plants, nasturtiums are foolproof, inexpensive, lush, and instant trailers and climbers. I sowed hundreds of nasturtium seeds that first spring. They, along with other annuals like portulaca, sweet alyssum, and lobelia, covered about half the ground in the garden. Just as large and imposing perennials can serve the purpose of shrubs while the slower-growing woody plants mature, so annuals can blanket the ground before slower-growing perennial groundcovers have done their job.

The sunniest spot in my garden is a bed in front of a 20-foot-long curved fence along a path. Planting that fence provided another lesson in temporary planting. My ultimate aim was to cover the fence with clematis, but to clothe it the first year I turned to another annual, morning glory (*Ipomoea tricolor* 'Heavenly Blue'). From mid-summer to frost we enjoyed a lush, luxurious wall of flowers. The following spring, after I had planted the clematis (*Clematis viticella* 'Etoile de Hollande', *C. paniculata*, and *C. montana* 'Elizabeth'), I allowed self-sown morning glories to remain so the wall wouldn't be bare while we waited for the clematis to mature. The morning glories also shaded the sensitive lower stems of the clematis, thereby helping them become established. In the third season the temporary planting had to be forcibly removed, so I simply weeded out morning-glory seedlings as they appeared.

Temporary plant combinations are sometimes invited to become permanent. By late summer of the first season one such combination was so lovely I decided to forgo my long-term plan. I had intended to use the smokebush (*Cotinus coggygria*) as a background shrub. My stand-in for it was the plume poppy (*Macleaya cordata*), a stately, six- to eight-foot-tall perennial with glaucous, blue-green leaves

about the size and shape of fig leaves, but with silvery undersides. Near the macleaya I planted pink single hollyhocks (*Althaea rosea*), and in front of it I put baby's breath (*Gypsophila paniculata*), white veronica (*Veronica spicata* 'Icicle'), pink monarda (*Monarda didyma* 'Croftway Pink'), and globe thistle (*Echinops humilis* 'Taplow Blue'). I decided when I saw it that I'd have to be crazy to remove the macleaya from this corner of the garden. My pseudo-shrub has become a permanent fixture.

Using a preponderance of tall plants also helps to achieve a mature effect in the flower border. To me, their height makes them look as though they've been in place longer. Accordingly, my plant list that first spring included perennials and biennials such as hollyhocks, foxgloves (*Digitalis purpurea*), and purple loosestrife (*Lythrum salicaria*); annuals such as *Cleome spinosa*; and an extravagance I haven't regretted for a moment: 100 lily bulbs. Besides providing height (up to four and a half feet), the lilies transformed the 25-foot-long area where I planted them into an exuberant swathe of hot color from June to August.

The lilies illustrate another way I achieve a mature effect quickly: I use plants en masse. If one kind of plant fills a large space, it appears to have grown into the space—the way a mature planting eventually does. I believe that's why the "one of everything" planting style never looks established. Limit your plant list, but don't scrimp on the numbers of each plant you buy.

Planting en masse is always a good idea, but it's essential for bulbs. In the fall of 1984 we planted hundreds of Darwin and cottage tulips in drifts of cream and pale blue, lavender and apricot, pale pink and peach. And, holding to my stricture against bare ground, I interplanted the tulips with hundreds of anemones (*Anemone blanda*), which also distracted the eye from the tulip leaves as they died back.

That same fall I made further use of the lilies. During the summer I had noted their colors and marked them with unobtrusive tags. In the fall I moved some of the lilies, grouping them with other plants according to color and blooming time. In early June of the second spring there were several apricot lilies among the blue-green cut-lace leaves of Russian sage (*Perovskia atriplicifolia*). In late June

we enjoyed deep dusty rose lilies complementing the lythrum nearby. This was a simple, inexpensive way of getting the color combinations I had planned without buying lilies by name.

**B**Y THE SPRING OF 1985, the beginning of our first full season in the garden, certain areas looked quite mature. In fact, because I deliberately planted too close, some areas already seemed overcrowded. For example, I had placed nine globe thistles with only a foot between each plant. Likewise daylilies: I had put in 30 to 40 plants tightly spaced for impact. We had enjoyed the immediate mature effect of this close planting; now it was time to divide the plants, a season or two sooner than if I'd spaced them as recommended. However, because my overall plan called for planting only part of the garden with perennials the first season, I now planted my divisions in the unfinished areas, which I had covered with annuals the previous year. The expedient of planting close and thinning later meant that instead of ever having sparseness anywhere I had continuous lush beauty. Yes, I had to divide the plants early. But division is inevitable anyway, so it wasn't extra work, really, it was just carried out sooner.

*The author covered nearly half the ground in her garden the first season with fast-growing and trailing annuals like nasturtiums and sweet alyssum (foreground).*

*To make her fledgling garden look more seasoned, she used relatively tall perennials such as hollyhocks and lythrum (background) and hybrid lilies, along with tall annuals like the cleomes that flank the lilies.*

Of course, fast-growing often means invasive, so this was also the season for "weeding" the price for an immediate effect. I weeded out some of the self-sown morning glories on my fence and planted the clematis there. I weeded out self-sown cleome on a small rise and planted lavender (*Lavandula angustifolia*), a fragrant "evergray" groundcover, in its place. And I held the invading underground runners of my beloved macleaya at bay. On the whole, though, we spent the second summer enjoying how



beautifully some things had turned out and studying places where the bloom sequence or composition needed improving.

By the autumn of our second season we could afford to plant the shady corner of the yard, farthest from the house, where our long-term plans called for a little woodland garden devoted to rhododendrons and azaleas. Until then, instead of the shrubs, I had used only big-leaved perennials such as *Ligularia stenocéphala* 'The Rocker', Rodgersia, and hostas, as well as another dramatic shade-loving plant, foxglove. They filled the space

with their large leaves or striking tall flowers, and because they enjoy the same lightly shaded, woodland conditions as the shrubs for which they were standing in, I didn't have to remove them when I planted the rhododendrons and azaleas. Now their presence extends the flowering season of that area through midsummer.

In the spring of 1986, our third year in Brooklyn, the garden was coming together nicely. I removed a plume poppy from an area where it was acting as a substitute shrub for some *Rosa rubrifolia*. The roses had become large enough in their own right,

and the plume poppy was beginning to interfere with their growth. But our garden was largely complete, with most of its permanent plantings in place. Because I enjoy the process of making a garden as much as the result, I've begun to improve the details of the garden and make corrections, and I'm going to keep on doing that until it's perfect—which, fortunately, it will never be. ❧

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Landscape designer Cynthia Gillis trained with English garden designer and author John Brookes. This is her first article for Horticulture.