

Understanding the Life Cycles of Plants

Annual plants live only 1 year, biennials 2 years, and perennials indefinitely, but if we ponder the natural life cycle of plants a bit it can help us better understand what is going on in our gardens and landscapes. For starters, here are examples of each:

Plant Life Cycles

Type	Annual	Biennial	Perennial
Garden	Zinnia Marigold Carrot Tomato	Forget-Me-Not Hollyhock Delphinium Pansy	Peony Rose Daisy Sedum spp.
Weed	Yellow Mustard Giant Ragweed Black Nightshade Lamb's Quarters	Sweet Clover Queen Anne's Lace Garlic Mustard Henbit	Purple Loosestrife Canada Thistle Crown Vetch Dames Rocket
Native	Fringed Gentian Spotted TouchMeNot Wild Senna Partridge Pea	Evening Primrose Tall Bellflower Hairy Beardstongue Horsemint	Lupine Rose Mallow Butterfly Weed New England Aster

Annual plants grow quickly in order to achieve growth, flower and seed production in just one season. We utilize annuals in our wildflower seeding projects (annual rye, seed oats, non-native annual wildflowers) as cover/nurse crops to provide quick cover growth and roots to hold the soil for the first growing season while the native seeds establish slowly. Biennial plants sprout and develop leaves the 1st season and typically return to flower and seed in the 2nd season. Perennial plants return every season, bloom in 1-3 years, once mature spread by seed and in addition some spread rhizome or tuber as well. There are exceptions to these life cycle designations and you may find a species labeled as a short lived perennial or it may behave as a biennial or annual.

Understanding a plant's life cycle will determine how to manage it. To control undesirable annual or biennial plants cut at least at bud or bloom to prevent reseeding. On the other hand, to assure return of annual and biennial plants, allow them to seed naturally, do your own reseeding or replanting. To control undesirable perennials, the entire plants should be removed using organic or herbicide methods.

Applying what we know about plant life cycles let's say that last fall we seeded our Tried & True Mix with a cover crop of Annual Rye. This 1st growing season, I would expect the Annual Rye to

establish and may see just seedlings of most species with only Blackeyed Susan blooming. The first year seedlings should mature to bloom in the 2nd or 3rd growing season, while the Annual Rye will gradually be crowded out by the native species.

Having patience as a native seeding project matures can be extremely challenging, but recognizing that each species has its own unique life cycle and natural stratification process can help us better understand why and perhaps make the waiting just a bit easier.