



This article is part of a weekly series published in the Batavia Daily News by Jan Beglinger, Agriculture Outreach Coordinator for CCE of Genesee County.

Master Gardener Corner: Garden Phlox

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If your summer perennial bed is looking tired and worn out, try adding some garden phlox (*Phlox paniculata*) for a splash of color. You can have phlox blooming in the garden for six weeks or more as some cultivars begin blooming in mid-summer while others start in late August. Garden phlox are available in a wide range of colors from soft pastels to hot electric blooms in pink, rose, red, salmon, orange, lavender, purple and white. There are also bi-color varieties that have an “eye” in the center of each flower or a contrasting margin. Depending on the variety garden phlox can grow two to five feet tall. New cultivars are always being released. Recently the focus has been on dwarf plants and increased powdery mildew resistance.

Aside from adding color to the garden, phlox are good cut flowers and sweetly fragrant. Native to North America, they are favorites of humming birds and butterflies. You may also find the hummingbird moth visiting your phlox for a sip of nectar.

Garden phlox are relatively easy to grow and are generally hardy throughout zones 4 to 8. They grow best in full sunlight, but will tolerate some light shade. Phlox really need about 6 hours of sunlight. Too much shade will decrease the number of blooms and the quality. Shade will also increase the likelihood of disease problems. Phlox thrive in soil that drains well, but has adequate moisture. They do not do well in hot, dry soils. When planting make sure to add generous amounts of organic matter. Phlox prefer a soil pH that is slightly alkaline. They are heavy feeders so plan to divide your phlox every 3 to 5 years in spring or fall.

Phlox will self-seed but it is rare for the seedlings to be the same color as their parents. They frequently revert to the “wild” magenta color. But keep an eye out for something new as your seedling could be a keeper. If you do not want them to seed remove spent clusters of faded flowers. Some newer phlox varieties are sterile and do not need deadheading.

If you grow phlox you know that its nemesis is powdery mildew. Powdery mildew (*Erysiphe cichoracearum*) produces a grayish-white powdery growth on the surface of phlox leaves in summer. The mildew that affects phlox is specific to phlox, so will not spread to other plants in the garden. Powdery mildew causes leaf drop and can affect the vigor of the plant over time. While not fatal it can be unsightly.

Powdery mildew begins on the lower leaves, turning leaves yellow and by late summer the leaves are often dying. White fungal threads produce spores early in the season, which germinate, penetrate leaves and absorb nutrients. Overwintering “pepper appearing” structures form late in the season in buds and on debris. Come next spring they release spores starting the disease cycle all over again.

There are some cultural practices that will help reduce powdery mildew. Provide plants with good air circulation to keep foliage dry. Avoid drought-like conditions



Powdery mildew on phlox
Source: Dow Gardens Archive,
Dow Gardens, Bugwood.org

and place plants where they will get sufficient sunlight. Plants with luxuriant growth from too much nitrogen are more prone to the disease. Stressed plants will usually develop some degree of mildew.

If you have had mildew problems in the past you can try this technique. When stems are about six inches tall, eliminate all but five or six stems per plant. Then pinch back the growing tips of the remaining stems. Plants will become more robust, produce larger clusters of flowers and should be less bothered by powdery mildew because of improved air circulation.

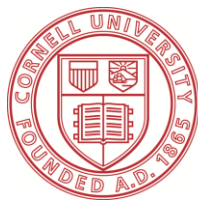
To help manage powdery mildew remove and destroy the plant stalks and leaves in the fall. Do not compost diseased plant material. This will help slow the arrival of the disease next year. Several fungicides are labeled for powdery mildew so look for those that can be used on phlox. The best long-term solution is to plant phlox varieties that are resistant to powdery mildew. Just remember that even mildew-resistant varieties of phlox are not totally mildew-proof.

Some phlox varieties that have been listed as powdery mildew resistant include: Alpha, David, Pastel Dream, Frosted Elegance, Laura, Miss Lingard, Norah Leigh, Robert Poore, Shortwood, David's Lavender, Windsor, Blue Boy, Prime Minister, Orange Perfection, Starfire, H.B. May, Fairest One, Bright Eyes, Dorffrendl, Dodo Hanbury Forbes, Eva Cullum, Franz Schubert, Delta Snow, Blue Lagoon, Cinderella, Jeana, Miss Universe, Caspian and Fairy's Petticoat.

Phlox have very few insect pests. The one most commonly seen is the spider mite. As they suck the liquid out of plant cells they cause pinprick yellow discoloration of the leaves. The leaves eventually turn brown and die. Spider mites are generally worse in hot, dry summers. Healthy, vigorously growing plants are better able to tolerate spider mite feeding. Make sure phlox are watered and fertilized adequately. If the mite problem is severe you can spray with an insecticidal soap. Do not spray during the heat of the day as you are more likely to damage the foliage. A good blast of water on the leaves can also be helpful as it knocks the mites off the plant.

A planting of phlox in bloom is a sight to behold with its aromatic, bright and showy long-lasting flowers.

Resources for this article include: University of Minnesota, North Carolina State University, University of Vermont, Purdue Extension, and University of Kentucky.



Cornell University
Cooperative Extension
Genesee County