

## Summer Perennial Pruning

As summer begins, some perennials have finished blooming for the year; some have just started to bloom; some have yet to bloom. Right now is a pivotal time of the year for garden tidiness. Your garden can “fall apart” if certain perennials miss the pruning care they require.

Pruning perennials sometimes confuses gardeners. Which perennials do I cut back? When do I cut them back? How far do I cut them back? It seems like a lot to remember! Sure, one could write a whole book on the subject. Here then are a few helpful ideas for summer perennial pruning.

As I often say, the first step in any type of gardening is to *know your plant*. It is especially important to “know your plant” when it comes to any gardening endeavor involving clippers, trimmers, and pruners. Is your plant evergreen and keep its foliage all year, or does it lose its leaves? If the plant retains its foliage year round, we’re not likely going to cut it to the ground. For example, cutting certain shrubby, evergreen perennials to the ground, like lavender, rosemary, or heather might kill the plant.

On the other hand, if the plant loses its leaves and totally dies back to the ground, you’ll certainly be cutting it back to the ground at some point during the year. Deciduous perennials like fall asters, shasta daisies, upright phlox, mums, and black-eyed susans all get cut to the ground after blooming or in the fall.

As you learn about your perennials, be sure to know when a particular plant is expected to flower. The timing of flowering is usually the key to knowing *when* to prune. Generally, for most shrubs and perennials, one does some kind of pruning right after the plants have finished blooming.

Certain perennials that are likely done blooming now, like columbines, lupines, bachelor buttons, and some “hardy” geraniums, can be cut back to the ground. A new set of summer leaves will emerge soon after, and some may rebloom.

Spring blooming bulbs like tulips, daffodils, and blue bells (to name a few) are done flowering for the year, and can be cut back to the ground. They will make no more leaves until next year.

Some perennials, once they are done blooming, should have only the flowering part of the plant removed, but *not be cut back to the ground*. Many types of iris, hostas, brunnera, heuchera and even peonies maintain attractive looking foliage long after blooming into fall, after which the remaining leaves can be removed.

Most hardy geraniums look especially untidy after flowering. Many will rebloom when cut back to the ground. Delphiniums and gaillardias can also be cut to the ground after blooming; they often rebloom on new shoots later in the summer.

Late summer and fall bloomers like echinacea, asters, black-eyed susans, helenium, and mums usually are cut back to the ground after blooming.

Lastly, and slightly off subject, staking is as equally as important as deadheading and pruning for a tidy looking garden. Staking helps flower spike remain sturdy and erect and prevent other plants from getting smothered by leaning stems. Perennials that commonly require staking, or even support rings include peonies, delphinium, meadow rue, bearded iris, valerian, jupiter's beard, and monkshood, to name a few. Be sure your plant receives the appropriate-sized stake, and remember, *know your plant!*

All this being said, the interest in pruning and tidying varies from gardener to gardener. For instance, not cutting back your perennials will provide shelter for small animals and food in the form of seeds. It's really up to you. Remember to know your plant *and* have fun.