

NATUREWORKS GARDENING CLASSES

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Basic and Advance Techniques for Perennial Garden Care

*I would like to thank Tracy DiSabato-Aust who was my inspiration for part 4 of this talk. Her book, *The Well Tended Perennial Garden* (Timber Press) is an invaluable manual of maintenance techniques for specific perennials. I discovered her cutting-edge ideas when the book was published in 1998.*

1. Basic principles and purposes of perennial garden maintenance

- a. Garden sanitation
- b. Aesthetics
- c. Prolong bloom time
- d. Improve overall appearance of late season garden
- e. Reduce staking.

2. Definition of terms

- a. **Dead leafing**- Removing of unsightly leaves right to the base of the leaf, deep into the heart of the crown of the plant.
- b. **Thinning**- Selective removal of individual shoots of a perennial to the base. This opens up the plant, encourages better air circulation, decreases fungus, and encourages larger flowers on fewer stalks.
- c. **Pinching** - As a perennial grows, pinching involves a constant cutting off of 1"-6" of vegetation from the growing tip. This is often done with foliage plants such as coleus, and with *Dendranthumums* (fall mums) if the gardener is willing to keep up with the constant process.
- d. **Cutting back** This a more drastic form of pinching. With this technique, the plant is allowed to grow for the early part of the growing season to 1/3-1/2 of its maximum height. Then a hard cut back is performed, reducing the plant size by 1/3, 1/2, even 2/3 depending on the amount of growth and the desired final mature size of the plant. The goal is to develop a branched, woody framework low down on the plant. This creates a branched plant that has a low center of gravity and won't flop over. If branching begins too high, the plant is top heavy.
- e. **Shearing** is a drastic technique used on long and repeat bloomers. It is performed after a plant has grown and bloomed for a long time. When the gardener sees more seedpods than new buds, hedge clippers or sheep shears are often used to shear an entire plant back by 1/3, 1/2, 2/3, and sometimes to within inches of the ground. If this is followed by a feeding of liquid seaweed and fish emulsion, the plant will regenerate, form a new head of foliage, and bloom again.

3. Late winter/spring cutting back and general maintenance to wake up the garden

- a. Cut back all herbaceous foliage
 - i. Some perennials maintain a basal crown of foliage. Dead leaf as needed
 - Example: Burgundy leaf Heucheras
- b. Evergreen perennials: two methods
 - i. *Iberis sempervirens* (Candytuft) This plant has its buds set the previous fall for early spring bloom. Wait until flowering is finished to shape it or you will cut off last years flower buds which are the buds set to flower the next year.

- ii. Helleborus (Hellebores, Winter and Lenten Rose) Most hellebores are semi-evergreen, completely evergreen in a mild winter. By spring, the old foliage usually shows winter damage. Cut all unsightly foliage to the base to make the current year's foliage look fresh and attractive.
 - iii. Bergenia also is semi-evergreen. Dead leaf the winter-damaged foliage. Be careful of the flower buds.
 - iv. Epimedium: some epimediums are semi-evergreen (E. versicolor, E. warleyensis, E. pinnatum ssp. Colchicum, E. youngianum X 'Roseum': Be sure to cut back last year's foliage in late March or early April to allow the flowers and young growth to appear. Otherwise the old foliage will mix in with the new growth, ruining the spring effect.
- c. Tie up ornamental grasses first; cut down with electric hedge clippers
 - i. Dead-leaf Festuca and Helictotrichon; never cut down completely.
 - ii. Liriope and Ophiopogon are difficult and leathery- may need to use blade on weed whacker or sharp shears. Even though "evergreen", remove last year's foliage to make current year's foliage look fresher.
- d. Perennials with a woody framework: cut back hard in early spring as soon as new growth breaks. Examples:
 - i. Lavandula (Lavender)- cut to within 12" of the ground. Remove all old, woody stems.
 - ii. Ruta graveolens (Rue)-cut to within 12" of the ground. Remove old, woody stems and those growing horizontally.
 - iii. Teucrium chamaedrys (Germander)-can be sheared to 8-12". Thin out old, woody stems.
 - iv. Perovskia (Russian Sage)- The first year, you must prune this plant to create a strong, woody framework. Otherwise, it will be long and sprawling. In the early spring of its second year, cut it back to a 12-15" low sub-shrub, creating a strong woody framework on which to grow a full and bushy plant.
 - v. Artemisia 'Powis Castle'- you must leave this plant untouched over the winter and cut it back hard, to within 4-12" of the ground, creating a woody framework, in early spring.
- e. Summer blooming flowering shrubs used in the perennial garden- as the new growth begins to break, cut back to a woody framework. Remove all dead and diseased wood.
 - i. Buddleia (Butterfly bush)- will grow 4-6 feet in one season. Can be cut to ground or cut to a woody framework at the height of your choice (if little winter dieback has occurred) to create a large, tree-like specimen.
 - ii. Caryopteris (Blue Mist Shrub)- will grow 2-3 feet in one season. Remove many of the older, woody branches to the base. Remove branches growing horizontally or that form weak crotches. Can be cut to within 12" of the ground or to a woody framework at the height of your choice (if little winter dieback has occurred).
 - iii. Abelia grandiflora (Glossy Abelia)- can be cut to the ground or pruned back to a low woody framework at the height of your choice. Will grow 2-4 feet in one season.
 - iv. Hypericum (St. Johnswort)-Most St. Johnswort shrubs die to the ground in the winter. Cut all foliage to the base and a new plant will regenerate and grow 2-4 feet in one season.
 - v. Roses- Roses vary in their pruning techniques by classification. In general, in the spring take down the protective hills of topsoil/compost added the previous fall and spread it around the drip line of the plant. Remove all dead and crossing branches. Open up the inside of the plant by thinning out dense wood in the center. This increases air circulation. Shrub roses are pruned like other summer blooming shrubs. The severity of pruning is based on the overall size that you want the plant to attain in the coming growing season.

Climbing roses are pruned to a woody framework and tied down to an appropriate support.

- f. Thinning of new shoots. Phlox paniculata and Monarda (bee balm) are two plants that can be thinned in the early spring. Remove 1/3 of the new growing shoots to the base. This will encourage better air circulation, reduce fungus, and create fewer and larger flowers.

4. Pinching/Cutting back plant/Shearing

The purpose of this work is to reduce the size of the plant, encourage branched, full growth, and manipulate the bloom time of the plant.

a. Cutting back to reduce staking.

Fall blooming asters, Dendranthemums (mums) Helianthus (perennial sunflowers), and other late bloomers are cut back in late May, June, up to the 4th of July (mid July along the shoreline) to reduce the height and encourage a branched, bushy plant that will not need staking. If you cut back too early, you may find you have to repeat the process. If you cut back too late, you may delay flowering until after a hard frost, thus losing the blooms for that season.

This technique can be used on a wide range of late blooming perennials.

- i. Other examples include: Rudbeckia 'Herbstonne', Nipponanthemums (Montauk daisies).
- ii. Ornamental grasses: A cutting edge technique that has proven successful is to cut back taller Miscanthus grasses and Erianthus ravennae grass to 18" in late June or early July. The new foliage comes back half as tall and does not flop. If this is done too late, the plant may not bloom. This is important if you are growing the older varieties of Miscanthus (M. 'Silver Feather', 'Zebrinus', 'Variegatus', 'Gracillimus'). There are many superior new hybrids on the market that are bred to be shorter and non-flopping.

b. Cutting back to reduce size.

You can incorporate plants into a smaller garden that would normally be out of scale by cutting them back hard. This will result in a shorter plant with lots of smaller flowers. An example is Eupatorium maculatum 'Gateway' which normally grows 6-7 feet tall and has enormous flowers the size of a bushel basket. If you cut this plant in half when it has reached 24-30" tall, it will branch and grow to a maximum size of 3-5 feet topped with 5-6 smaller flowers on the end of each stem.

- i. Other examples: Aster tartaricus, Phlox paniculata (you can also look for the new dwarf cultivars), Rudbeckia triloba, Vernonia (Ironweed)

c. Cutting back to prevent flowering and maintain a bushy habit

The ultimate example of a plant that responds well to this technique is Artemesia 'Silver Mound'. This is primarily a foliage plant, grown for its tight mound of fine-textured silver foliage. When it begins to form flower buds, the plant grows leggy and sprawls open in the center. Since the flowers are unattractive, shear back the plant in half before the flower buds appear (usually by June or early July). This will eliminate the flowering stage and create a full bushy plant for the rest of the growing season. I also remove the flowers from Artemesia stellariana (perennial dusty miller) and use that opportunity to give the plant a further cutting back to avoid late summer legginess.

d. Cutting back to manipulate the bloom time.

When you cut back a plant, you set back its bloom time by about 2-3 weeks. Cutting back early in the season has a mild effect. Cutting back in July has a much stronger effect.

- i. **Vacation cutting back** – If you know that a plant will bloom when you will be away on vacation, you can manipulate its bloom time by cutting the entire plant back. An example is perennial hibiscus, which normally blooms in August. If you cut this plant back by 1/3-1/2 in early July, you will create a shorter, branched plant that will not begin flowering until two to three

weeks later than its normal bloom time, i.e. the very end of August or the beginning of September. Thus, when you return from vacation after Labor Day, your plant will just be starting its peak bloom time.

- ii. **Cutting back to achieve peak bloom for a party, wedding, or garden tour** Use the same concept described above to time blooming of perennials for special events. For example, if you are planning a September wedding in your garden, you can purposely cut back your late July and August bloomers hard in late June or early July. Then, these will bloom in tandem with your regular September bloomers.
- iii. **Pinching or cutting back in stages to prolong the bloom time** (double or triple it) and to hide the unsightly part of the plant after blooming. This is one of the most exciting advanced maintenance techniques a gardener can learn. The concept is to create a layered effect. The back ½ of the plant is left alone to grow to its normal height and bloom at its normal time. The front half of the plant is cut back by 1/3-1/2 in late May or June, at the latest early July. The exact time of cutting back depends upon how quickly the plant grows and what time during the summer or fall a plant blooms. Early bloomers such as *Leucanthemum* (Shasta daisies) are cut back in Southern Connecticut in late May or very early June as the growth is elongating but before the buds are setting. Late bloomers such as *Chelone lyonii* 'Hot Lips' (Turtlehead) can have the front half of the plant cut back as late as early July. The result is that the back of the plant blooms first at its normal time. The front (pinched or cut back) half of the plant then begins to bloom 2-3 weeks later. As the back half is finished, it can be deadheaded; it will be hidden by the blooming front half. This doubles the bloom time and serves to detract the eye from the dying flowers and declining foliage of the back half of the plant.
 - This technique can be applied to a plant in three stages as well, which will triple your bloom time.
 - You can also take a large drift of one variety of perennials and cut back various sections at two week intervals, then manipulating and spreading out the bloom time for many more weeks wherever you desire.
 - If you discover that you have created jarring color combinations, this technique can be used to delay blooming of one of the two plants and thus prevent clashing colors!
 - This can be done with MANY perennials. Some of my favorites to use this technique on are: *Monarda*, *Leucanthemum*, taller *Veronicas*, *Chelone*, *Hibiscus*, *Asters*, *Echinaceae*, *Helenium*, *Heliopsis*, *Nepeta siberica*, *Nepeta subsessilis*, *Physostegia*, and *Platycodon*.
- e. **Cutting back the front of a plant to staggered heights to clothe the plant with attractive foliage all the way to the ground.** Some perennials, by the time they bloom, have "ugly legs", i.e. they lose the lower leaves or the lower leaves become unsightly. Therefore, when you view them the flowers are pretty but the foliage detracts. By cutting the front of a plant in stages, you can create a stepped or layered effect to the front foliage of the plant, hiding the ugly legs. Try cutting the very front to 6", the next level to 8-12", the next level 15-20", etc.
- f. **Cutting back to improve a plant's shape after blooming.** Some perennials only bloom once and their appearance after blooming can be greatly improved by cutting and shaping the remaining foliage after deadheading. This can be done by hand or with hedge clippers. A good example is *Baptisia australis* (False Indigo). It blooms in late May and June. The foliage waxy, blue green, and attractive all season, forming a shrub-like plant 3-5 feet tall and 2-3 feet wide at maturity. Hand prune *Baptisias* in late June or early July by reducing their height by 6-12", cutting back to another leaf or side shoot, never leaving a stub. This will create a much fuller, bushier plant for the rest of the growing season

- i. Other examples of plants that benefit from cutting back and shaping after blooming: Iberis (Candytuft), Aurinia (Basket of Gold), Euphorbias (this is very important or they will become very straggly in late summer), Helianthemum, and Veronica 'Crater Lake'.

5. Deadheading

All plants are put on this earth to reproduce themselves. After a plant blooms, it goes to seed. Seed formation takes a lot of energy from a plant. The basic concept behind deadheading is to remove spent flowers immediately after blooming, thus preventing the plant from going to seed. For perennials that only bloom once, the energy then goes back into the foliage of the plant, encouraging it to grow healthy, new foliage for the rest of the growing season. Many perennials have the capacity to bloom more than once; some may bloom repeatedly until the end of the growing season. For these plants, it is critical that you deadhead on a regular basis to prevent all seed formation and send all of the energy back to the formation of new flower buds. The following are basic deadheading techniques:

- a. Cut the flower stalks to the base, deep within the crown of the foliage.
 - i. Examples: Iris, daylilies, hosta, Ligularia 'The Rocket'
- b. Cut the flower off down to a large set of good leaves on the flower stalk; after 2-3 weeks, when the flower stalk leaves get unsightly, cut the stalk all the way down to the basal foliage. If there is no basal foliage, cut it back anyway and this will stimulate basal foliage to grow.
 - i. Examples: Leucanthemum (Shasta daisy), Lychnis chalcedonica (Maltese Cross).
 - ii. Examples of plants that may rebloom later in the season, usually in the fall when the weather cools off, if this technique is used: Achillea millefolium hybrids, Achillea 'Moonshine', Echinops, Centaurea montana and dealbata.
- c. Cut back to the next set of flower buds on the flower stalk until the plant is done blooming. When there are no more flower buds, either cut the flower stalk to the base, or cut the plant back to good, bushy growth. Feed repeat bloomers to encourage more flowering stalks to appear.
 - i. Examples: Knautia, Scabiosa, Echinacea
 - ii. Alternative example: Buddleia (Butterfly Bush). Do as described above, although this is more of a woody shrub. Constant removal of spent blossoms back to another flower bud can cause a butterfly bush to bloom from July until late September or beyond.
- d. Cut the flowers off to good leaves. These plants remain up and are bushy all season long, offering substance to the garden even after blooming.
 - i. Examples: Caryopteris, Eupatorium, Nipponanthemum nipponicum (Montauk Daisy), Baptisia, Coreopsis tripteris, Digitalis ambigua.
- e. Shear back a plant after its initial heavy bloom period to encourage new growth and repeat blooms. Many perennials are long and repeat bloomers. After blooming heavily for 4-6-8 weeks, the plants become leggy, some of the older foliage may become unsightly or spotted, and there are many dead seed pods mixed in with the new buds and flowers. This technique takes courage. I often nickname it "cutting off the ponytail" as it seems as if you are removing a tremendous amount of the plant. I usually start by using a hedge clipper and shear the plant back by 1/3, 1/2 or even 2/3. I then clean up any stubs left by the shearing with my hand clippers. I foliar feed the plant and within 2-3 weeks, it will regrow a new head of foliage and begin blooming again.
 - i. Examples of plants that respond well to this drastic cutting technique: Nepeta mussini (Catmint), Lamium, Coreopsis verticillata (threadleaf types such as 'Moonbeam', 'Zagreb' and 'Sweet Dreams' should be sheared in late July or early August. If you wait to do it until later in the summer, they probably won't rebloom), Salvia nemerosa and other perennial Salvias, and Tradescantia.
- f. Plants that go dormant - Dead head by any of the methods described above; foliage gradually goes dormant; cut to ground when leaves are yellow. Some plants regrow new foliage later in the season

- i. Examples of plants that go dormant and disappear for the rest of the growing season after blooming: *Mertensia* (Virginia bluebells), *Dicentra spectabilis* (Old fashioned bleeding heart. These won't go dormant until late July, later in a cool summer), *Trillium*, spring blooming bulbs.
 - ii. Examples of plants that go dormant and then regrow new foliage in the fall: *Papaver orientale* (Oriental poppies), *Doronicum pardalianches* (Greater leopardsbane daisy), *Asphodeline lutea* (King's Spear).
 - g. Plants are SELF-Cleaning. Flowers fall off on their own and deadheading isn't needed. Many of these will self-sow and repeat bloom.
 - i. Examples: *Dicentra eximia* (Dwarf bleeding heart), *Corydalis lutea*, *Ceratostigma plumbaginoides* (Plumbago, leadwort), *Campanula carpatica*, *Galium odorata* (Sweet woodruff), *Vinca minor* (myrtle).
 - h. Don't deadhead! Plant either self-sows or has attractive seedpods that can be harvested and used for dried flower arrangements. Once self-seeding plants have ripened their seed and it has dropped or been harvested, cut stalks to the base
 - i. Examples: *Aquilegia* (Columbine- let these self sow as they are short lived perennials), biennial foxgloves, *Alcea ficifolia* (single hollyhocks), *Belamcanda chinensis* (Blackberry lily, grown for attractive pods), *Linaria purpurea*.
 - ii. Learn to use your judgement. Some people allow *Echinaceae* (purple coneflower) and *Rudbeckia* (black eyed Susan) to go to seed to encourage more plants. This is appropriate in a cottage garden or meadow situation. After a while, the self-sown seedlings may become a nuisance at which point, the plants will be deadheaded regularly and seed formation avoided.
 - i. Liveheading. This is a drastic technique when you purposely remove perfectly good flowers because either you don't want them or you don't like them. An example is *Stachys byzantina* (Lamb's Ears). Many people remove the flowers and grow it simply as a foliage plant. (Note there is a non-flowering form *Stachys byzantina* 'Silver Carpet'). Many hosta connoisseurs remove leggy or washed out flowers on hostas that they grow only for the foliage. Liveheading is also done when a plant turns out to be a completely wrong color and clashes with its neighbors but you don't want to move it until the weather cools off in the fall.
- 6. **Dead leafing** This is a grooming technique that improves the appearance of the garden. Deadhead by any of the methods described above; as summer progresses, remove old, tired leaves to the base and leave the fresh, younger leaves on the plant. This will freshen up the plant and keep it nice all season long.
 - a. Examples of perennials that should be dead leafed: *Alchemilla mollis* (Lady's Mantle), *Brunnera macrophylla* (Heartleaf forget-me-not), large leaf cranesbill geraniums (most except the *G. sanguineum* types which should be sheared after blooming), *Bergenia*, *Hemerocallis* (daylilies).

Reference material on perennial garden care:

The Well Tended Perennial Garden: Planting and Pruning techniques

Tracy Disabato-Aust. Timber Press 1998

Caring for Perennials

Janet Macunovich, Storey Publishing, 1996

Organic Gardening Magazine

July/August 1998, pp. 26-31

How to Get More Blooms from your Perennials By: Nancy DuBrule

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