

It's a matter of cutting back. We all know there are many reasons and ways to cut back. For example, if one's waistline is feeling a little tight, perhaps cutting back on calorie intake might be a good idea. If one's finances are running a little short, cutting back on spending is always a wise choice. Although both situations are solid reasons for cutting back, today I want to focus on a different type of cutting back —specifically, cutting back your annual plants.

Often I hear the complaint, "My potted flowers were blooming beautifully when I bought them. I've been watering and fertilizing them, but now they have stopped blooming. What's wrong?"

My immediate response to that question is, "Have you been cutting back?"

Routinely removing the spent flowers, a practice called deadheading, is the simplest form of cutting back. A small shears works well for this task. Some annual plants have very crisp, thin stems and can be deadheaded using your fingers. This type of deadheading is referred to as pinching. No matter what method is used, if one simply removes only the withered petals, it is not deadheading. To properly deadhead, one must remove the entire spent flower; otherwise, the ovary of the flower remains attached to the plant. Assuming pollination occurred when the flower was blooming, seeds will develop within the ovary. When annual plants go to seed, their objective in life has been fulfilled. They not only stop blooming, but often they stop growing altogether. By regularly deadheading, one breaks that cycle, and the plant continues to bloom throughout the growing season. Interestingly, some annuals do not need deadheading. They are classified as self-cleaning plants. These annuals include wave petunia, calibrachoa, begonia, lobelia and verbena.

Even though deadheading may not be needed on some annuals, or if one habitually practices deadheading on those that do, most annual plants by mid-season will have shoots that have become overgrown, gangly and messy-looking. These unattractive, stringy stems reveal where previous flowers were attached. Any new blossoms will occur only at the ends of these elongated shoots. When this happens, it is time to cut back the stems. Such action refreshes and brings new life to the entire plant. In a

matter of a week or two, new blooms and bright new foliage will appear once again.

Incidentally, cutting back is applicable to many perennials. When perennials bloom, their beauty is splendid but often fleeting. Many of them will also re-bloom from cutting back. These include aster, baby's breath, baptisia, campanula, cone flower, coreopsis, foxglove, gaillardia, hollyhock, helianthus, lamium, monkshood, salvia, and Shasta daisy.

Mid-season is fast approaching and although you may be thinking of cutting back on calorie intake or cutting back on spending, it is time to take a close look at your potted annual flowers. If they are not blooming as abundantly as they once did, consider cutting back. Do it now and they will reward you with a flush of new blossoms that should last until frost.