

Early summer maintenance is a great way to improve the look and health of your perennial garden. By removing the flowers, buds and even some of the stems, you can increase the plant's health, delay the flowering time, and even increase the number of flowers. Three of the most common maintenance practices involve shearing, pinching and thinning.

Shearing is usually done to improve the aesthetics of the plant. It also is performed to increase the likelihood of a second bloom. When we shear, we remove all of the flowers and a good share of the flower stalks. Perennial salvia, coreopsis, delphinium, Shasta daisy, columbine, coral bell, hardy geranium, and catmint are all examples of perennial flowering plants which benefit from this practice. By this time of year, the flowers of these perennials are nearly spent. These plants are beginning to flop and look disheveled. Shearing these plants removes all the old growth, while it encourages new growth. To properly shear, one needs to cut away the old vegetation to the point where new growth is visible, usually close to the base of the plant. As a result, this type of shearing fosters new growth; and, in turn, new flower buds will form. With a reasonable amount of good fortune, such practice will cause these plants to re-bloom within a period of five to six weeks.

Shearing is also a great way to rejuvenate spent annuals— providing they have not completely gone to seed. If seeds are allowed to fully develop, the plant dies. That is why deadheading (the immediate removal of spent flowers) of annuals is encouraged. If performed routinely, deadheading prevents the plant from producing seed; thus, it continues to grow, and it continues to bloom.

The second type of perennial maintenance is pinching. This is most commonly associated with chrysanthemums (mums) and asters. In comparison, while shearing involves removing a good share of the plant, pinching is more selective. Pinching involves removing either all of the buds or being more selective and removing only every fourth or fifth bud. Pinching promotes branching, while at the same time it creates a longer and staggered bloom time.

Interestingly, this year with such an unusual and early spring, many chrysanthemums are currently beyond the bud stage and are already blooming. With this situation, I suggest that as soon as the flowers fade, remove them and there *may* still be time to produce a second flush of bloom before frost. Notice, I

emphasize the word *may*. Pinching back mums is normally discontinued after mid-to-late July to allow ample time for the flowers to bloom before frost arrives.

The third type of perennial maintenance is thinning. Thinning is especially beneficial to large plants that are prone to disease. A good example of this type of plant is tall garden phlox. Although garden phlox is a wonderful summer flowering plant, it is also a plant that is frequently plagued with powdery mildew. By thinning, which involves removing some of the stems, you are providing the remaining plants with better air circulation, more space and more light. This practice helps to minimize disease and allows the remaining stems to grow more vigorously. Thinning generally involves removing about every third or fourth stem by cutting it to the ground or by leaving less than six inches of the stem.

Incorporating these three early summer maintenance practices will greatly enhance the beauty of your perennial garden and improve the health of your plants. The best time to complete these procedures is within the first few weeks of summer.