



Perennial Pruning

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

Shearing

Shearing is usually done to improve the overall aesthetics of the plant, but also to increase the likelihood of a second flush of blooms. When shearing, you're removing a lot of the plant – the spent flowers, the flower stalks, and even some of the stems. Catmint 'Walker's Low' is a perfect example of a plant that can be sheared. Once the flowers seem to be done blooming, the foliage usually starts to flop or fall down. If you look at the base of the plant, you can usually see new growth beginning to develop. So when shearing, remove all the old plant material, letting the new growth get larger, and eventually bloom.

Pinching

Pinching is most commonly associated with mums or asters, but other perennials can benefit from it as well. Where shearing removes a great deal of plant material, pinching is much more selective. In pinching, all buds are removed to delay flowering to the fall, which will help achieve that nice fall color mums are known for. An alternative to removing all of the buds is to remove every fourth or fifth bud to create a staggered and longer period of bloom time.

Thinning

Thinning is especially beneficial to large plants that can be prone to disease. By removing some of the stems of the plant and thinning it out, there will be better air circulation around the plant, more space, and quite a bit more light. This lets the remaining stems increase in vigor. When thinning a perennial plant, remove about every third or fourth stem by cutting it either to just above the crown, or by leaving 6-12" of stem and leaves. Leave some stem material if your perennial is especially sparse and you want to create the illusion of fullness. Either way will help and achieve the desired benefits.

The best time to do any sort of perennial pruning is the first week in July. If you wait until later than that, the plants might not have enough time to regrow and bloom before frost. Another point to remember is that not all perennials will respond positively to mid-season pruning. If you are unsure about any of your perennials and their ability to benefit from this type of maintenance, call the extension office and we can discuss it!

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