

## **The Art of Cutting Back**

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The way Mother Nature sees it, the sole purpose of flowers is to develop seeds.

After a plant finishes flowering, it uses all its energy to form seeds. Once the seeds develop, nature has guaranteed the continuation of the species and the plant dies back. It's not a particularly romantic outlook for gardeners who plant flowering plants to enhance their landscape. It is simply science.

Forming seeds dominates growth activity at the expense of the plant, which often dies back. Sadly, especially for annuals, once the seeds have formed, there is no reason for the plant to continue to live because the preservation of the species has been preserved.

Those gardeners in the know work diligently throughout the summer to preserve the plants and to ensure the plants continue to produce flowers. This is done by deadheading the plants. Not to be confused with Dead Heads (as in the Grateful Dead), deadheading is the process of clipping spent flowers from the plants. By allowing flowers to go to seed, nutrition is robbed from the plants and weakens the energy needed to produce new flowers. To prevent this, fading flowers are removed from the plants.

Deadheading encourages plants to direct more energy toward root and shoot development and helps promote a second bloom. By removing spent flowers heads (before turning to seed) from annuals, and in some cases biennials, perennials and flowering shrubs, this fools the plant into believing it needs to re-flower to produce seeds for the next generation of plants. From a landscape perspective, it gives a garden a cleaner, more polished look.

Deadheading plants may seem like a daunting task, but if done regularly, it is not quite as intense a garden chore. Spending a short time in the garden each day, looking for spent flowers to deadhead keeps the garden looking pristine and lightens the burden.

The job should be done when the flower on the plant begins to decline. The length of time a plant stays in bloom depends on the species and on the weather (torrential rains, strong winds and unseasonably hot weather also have an impact).

Deadheading is very simple. The fading flowers can be pinched for cut from the plant. Examine the growth habit of the plant. If new flower buds are forming, cut the top-most fading flower. If the flower is not on a bare stalk, the cut is made at the leaf. Flowers on bare stalks, should be cut at the base of the plant where there is a grouping of leaves. In all cases, be sure to remove all of the seeds.

Some examples of flowering plants and the deadheading process include: moderately bushy plants like marigolds should be clipped at the individual stem; bushy plants, such as coreopsis, can be sheared back with grass shears; and, plants like black-eyed Susans that produce one flower at the end of a long stalk should be cut at the base of the stalk.

There are some exceptions for the deadheading rules. Plants with decorative seed pods add interest to a garden during the autumn. They also provide food for wildlife during the winter. The seeds of sunflowers, Echinacea (coneflowers) and Rudbeckia (black-eyed Susans) are examples of plants that sustain birds during the winter.

There are several educational factsheets available providing additional information on deadheading. The deadheading brochures available through Penn State University extension provide listings of flowering plants and how and when to deadhead each.