A Summer Haircut

Two techniques to help keep your garden in bloom and fresh foliage throughout the growing season.

John Emmanuel

SIMPLY STATED, deadheading is the removal of spent flowers, either with a hand pruner or the tips of your fingers. Shearing is the removal of spent flowers and some leaves with shears. Just about any plant grown in a garden setting is a candidate for deadheading. Shearing, on the other hand, is not advisable for all plants, even though ostensibly it too removes faded flowers. A gardener, who wouldn't question shearing *Spiraea ×bumalda* 'Goldmound' to remove old bloom and encourage fresh foliage, would never approach a bearded iris with the same tool. Shearing provides a particular look and result that we will discuss further on.

Although the primary reason for deadheading and shearing is to keep the garden looking fresh and new, there is another important benefit: Removing the spent flowers, including the ovaries, redirects a plant's energy back into the plant and in many perennials encourages a second flush of flowers. *Coreopsis verticillata* and *Salvia superba*, for example, will faithfully reflower after being cut back. But the diminished returns offered by many perennials are not always worth the effort of culling out the spent flowers. There is nothing more distressing than seeing *Platycodon grandiflorus* persistently snipped here and there along the flowering stem to allow a few stray flowers. Of course personal

Cut perennials like this lady's mantle down to the base of its dismal looking mid-summer leaves. This will produce a flush of fresh new foliage that will last to the end of the growing season.

Snap off the spent blooms of daylilies by hand. Once all the blooms of a stalk have bloomed and gone by, cut the stalk off at ground level.

ILLUSTRATIONS BY BEVERLY DUNCAN

taste is at issue here, and there are no rules for taste other than what makes you happy.

With annuals, however, there can be no doubt that removing the spent flowers assures continued bloom, which would otherwise cease in favor of seed production. With some annuals, such as petunia and nasturtium, which begin to show more stem than leaves or flowers, it is best just to cut off the majority of the leggy stems to the earliest signs of growth near the base of the stems. They will then put their effort into putting out new leaves and flowers.

DEADHEADING The procedures of deadheading are straightforward. Ideally, the gardener should remove the spent flower, including the ovary and the stem, down to a hidden joint. There are exceptions, however, such as narcissus. Reaching down to the base of each stalk to cut it off is an unnecessary labor considering that in another month the entire plant will yellow off and be removed at ground level. By simply snapping off the tidy floral bundle with your fingers and dropping it as litter on the ground, you can quickly deadhead entire stands of narcissi before moving on to other tasks. Daylilies are another example where mass flowering is treated brusquely, the spent flowers snapped off the stalk to litter the ground. In this case the flowering stalks are then removed one by one when they are finished flowering. Once the hemerocallis are finished flowering, we cut all the remaining stalks and foliage to the ground.

The worst thing to do no matter how rushed you are is to leave the telltale signs of your work. Nothing is less appealing than a plant just beginning to put out its second flush of leaves but still showing the now-browning flower stalks. There is a way to deadhead most plants discreetly if you look carefully. The stalks of *Aurinia saxatilis*, for instance, originate in a whorl beneath the visible roseate of leaf and flower. If you lift up the stem and look underneath, the whorl is visible and the stalks can be easily clipped with pruners. With peonies and dahlias we look for a point just below the surface of the foliage plane, at a joint or just above a leaf. The unsightly cut will then be hidden below other leaves.

SHEARING There are times, however, when hand pruners are not the right tool to remove old flowers and ragged foliage. In these cases well-sharpened shears are better. In the Wild Garden at Wave Hill, *Iberis sempervirens* forms low mounds along some of the walkways. Once they have finished flowering, we shear both the flower stalks and the evergreen stems. This helps to shape the plants and prevents them from getting leggy.

Among shrubs, varieties of *Spiraea* ×*bumalda* benefit from shearing. We remove not only the flower heads

The secret to good deadheading is to make it as invisible as possible. With this peony, cut off the spent bloom and stalk all the way back to a leaf joint so the offending cut mark is hidden.

Annuals such as nasturtiums have a tendency to get leggy and weak later in the summer. Cut the gangly stems back to a sturdier part of the plant, which will often be only a couple of inches from the ground.

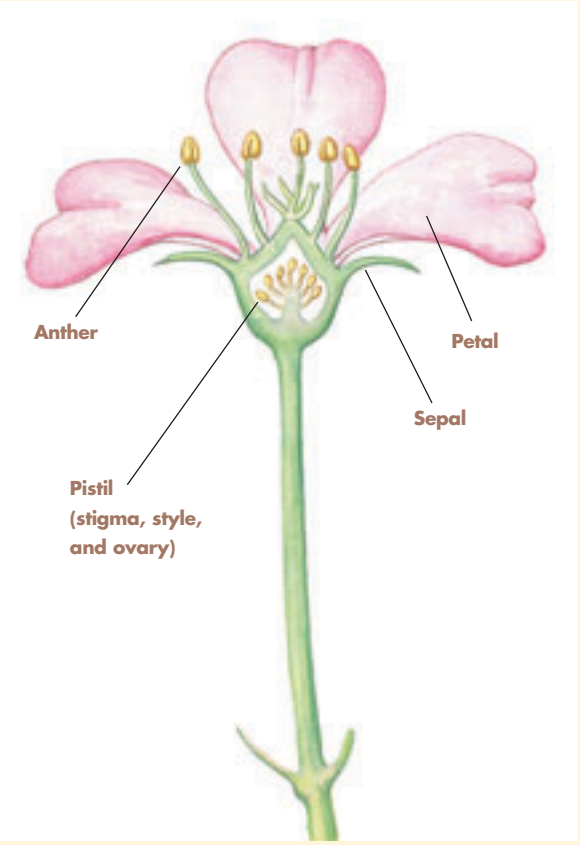
but some of the foliage as well. Shearing encourages a new set of flowers and, better yet with the gold forms, a flush of colorful foliage.

Many of the early-flowering perennials respond wonderfully to a shearing to the ground. Alchemilla, columbine, pulmonaria, *Stylophorum diphyllum*, and many species of hardy geraniums often look tired by mid-summer; a shearing produces a fresh flush of foliage and often another round of bloom.

At Wave Hill we don't deadhead or shear every plant. We leave plants that continue to have visual appeal after their peak season. Hydrangeas don't need immediate pruning, as the dried flowers are appealing. *Limonium latifolium* as well as other statice continue to look attractive long after their florets have perished. Sometimes plants with tall flower stalks, such as *Crambe cordifolia*, can be used as scaffolding for later-blooming vines such as the morning glories. *Baptisia australis* is left standing because of its remarkable seedpods. Sooner or later, however, they all come down, but it's not an urgent task with these plants. Toward the end of the season, with autumn spelling the end of the party, whatever urgency there was disappears. We rarely deadhead the late-blooming asters as the dried flower heads mingle nicely with the dried shafts of miscanthus all winter.

Saving Seed

At Wave Hill we occasionally leave one or two stalks because we are saving those for seed. In those cases we generally tag the stalks so that no one unwittingly removes them. How often has that happened! Tying a paper bag over the seedpod is also a good way of warning others not to remove it. It also captures the seed in case the grower returns to the plant after the seed pod has dehisced. *—J.E.*



It is important to remove all reproductive parts of a flower when deadheading, including the pistil where seeds would otherwise be produced.

To Shear or Not to Shear

It's not easy to compile a list of plants to shear because so much is left to one's taste. I think of shearing as shaping. If one includes the complete cutting down of all foliage to the ground then just about any plant can be sheared. In fact, most plants are sheared at the end of the season, ornamental grasses, epimediums and liropes to name a few, not including those taken to the ground to rejuvenate their foliage during the growing season.

Plants to shear: Lavenders, some artemisias, *Brunnera macrophylla*, dianthus and many varieties of mound-like alpines, satureja, rosemaries, and thymes.

Plants not to shear: *Arundo donax*, most annual vines such as morning glories, *Belamcanda chinensis*, bergenias, camassias, *Boltonia asteroides*, chelones, peonies, dahlias, *Veronicastrum virginicum*, inulas, roses, and tiarellas. *—J.E.*

If You're Going on Vacation

For those going away on vacation, use the opportunity to cut everything back before leaving. Provided someone is watering them, the annuals will be well on their way to a second showing by the time of your return. Pansies do well as long as it is cool. Coleus, gomphrena, and celosia are just a few that benefit from cutting back. Where summers are hot and humid, some plants cannot be resuscitated no matter how we cut them back. The best way to learn which plants respond to any treatment is to experiment. *—J.E.*