

Deadheading – *The removal of old or spent flowers*

By Cyndi West and Margie Geiser

Deadheading is "*beneficial to most herbaceous ornamental plants*".

Reasons for deadheading

- It makes the bed look neater and improves the overall appearance of the plant
- When developing seed pods are removed promptly, many perennials lose track of what they were up to and produce a second bloom
- Self-seeding is prevented, thereby short-circuiting the seed crop which reduces subsequent weed problems
- Pinching or cutting back is one of the most effective ways to avoid staking
- Biennials can be persuaded to behave like perennials
- It can promote vegetative and root growth rather than seed production
- For many plants, long flowering can only be achieved through deadheading
- It can extend the plant's season of interest
- It can help prevent or control pests and disease by increasing air circulation around plants

When do you deadhead?

Usually there is deadheading to be done from spring to killing frost. The age of a plant greatly influences its deadheading needs. New plants give a grace period by requiring less frequent deadheading in their first year in the garden. Weather also greatly affects deadheading from season to season, with cool, moist weather extending the bloom life and sweltering heat and pelting rain decreasing it.

How to deadhead

How to deadhead depends on the particular growth habit of the plant. Sometimes you need to remove individual dead flowers one at a time, or remove whole clusters of dead flowers, or cut off the entire flowering stalk or scape. Deadheading is species-specific so it is difficult to put plants in neat categories or compartments; however, three general categories can be developed based on the growth habit of the plant.

Category 1: Individual Stems

The center flower opens and finishes first, followed by buds of side shoots that originate from low on the central flower stalk.

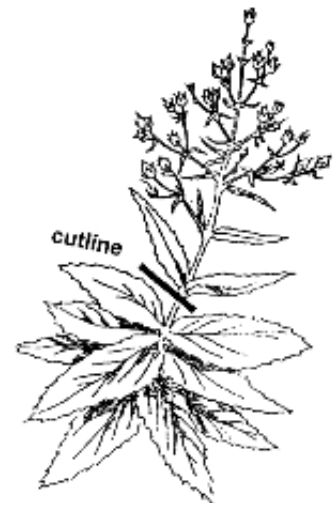
Clip off faded flower stalks just above a budded secondary stem.



Category 2: A Cluster of Pods Per Stem

Flowers are clustered close on one stem or on side stalks off a single stem.

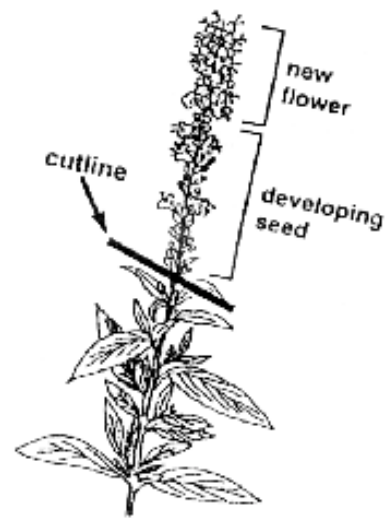
Remove the whole stem when all the members are spent or nearly so. The cut can be made just above the first sizable, good-looking set of leaves below the flower.



Category 3: Spikes

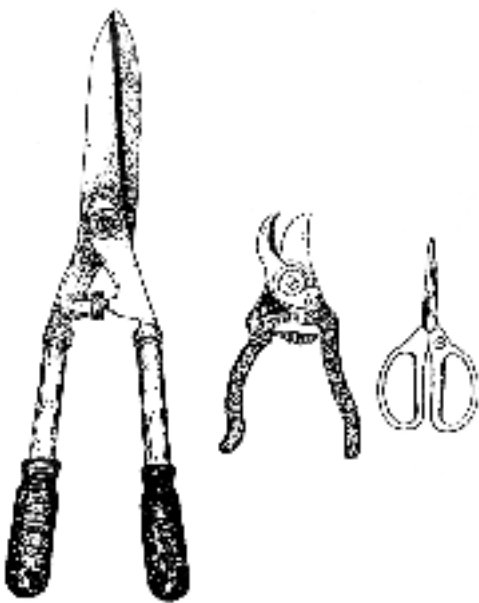
Flowers are lined up in a spike or on very short stems, in an elongated cluster called a raceme.

When there is a greater length of seed pods on the spike than there is fresh flowers, cut it.



Deadheading: The tools of choice

The tools most often used to deadhead include hedge shears, by-pass pruners, and pruning scissors. Some individuals prefer to remove spent flowers by hand.



Recommended Reading

DiSabato-Aust, Tracy. *The Well-Tended Perennial Garden*, Planting & Pruning Techniques. Timber Press, 1998

Macunovich, Janet. *Caring for Perennials, What to Do and When to Do It*. Storey Publications, 1996