



Pinching a dahlia to encourage more blooms and longer stems

Pinching back for more blooms

by Carol Barany

As far as I'm concerned, growing weather arrived in the Yakima Valley on the first day of summer. It was a glorious day for gardeners, with temperatures finally reaching the eighty degree mark.

It was about time, for crying out loud. This was a long and worrisome spring, marked by frost dangers and concerns about pollination.

A wise grower once advised that “we could all take a lesson from the weather. It pays no attention to criticism.”

WSU meteorologist Nic Loyd confirmed that at the Yakima Airport weather station, since 1947, the interval of April and May 2022 was the 2nd coolest such interval on record (1955 was the coolest).

While March 2022 was 3.1 degrees warmer than average, April was 5.6 degrees cooler, making March the warmer month. That doesn't happen very often. Long-time gardeners who planted tomatoes on Mother's Day weekend as they have for decades may have had to buy a second round of replacement seedlings because of frigid nights that continued into May.

Who knew? On a warm and sunny late-March Sunday, I planted zinnia, cosmos, celosia, amaranthus, love-in-a-mist, and ageratum seeds in my small unheated greenhouse. By the following Tuesday, most of the seeds had germinated, far faster than ever before.

And then April arrived, and those seedlings just stood still, not happy spending freezing nights in an unheated and drafty greenhouse. They didn't budge much in May either.

Those seedlings were transplanted weeks ago. But the same plants had relatives that self-sowed themselves around the garden without any help from me. While the volunteers are twice as big as the seedlings I worked so hard to start, the seedlings are finally beginning to catch up.

If you grow perennials, you probably did the Chelsea Chop sometime in June this year. It's so named because in Britain, the best time to do it is around the end of May, just when the RHS Chelsea Flower Show is happening. The Chop is a pruning method that limits the size, controls the flowering season, and decreases the flopping of a number of perennials. It involves cutting back by half the stems of tall perennials that bloom later in the summer.

When it comes to summer flowering annuals with a branching form, pinching is another critical maintenance technique. Just like the Chelsea Chop, a pinch encourages plants to produce more branches near the base, which increases the total number of flowering stems per plant. It also stimulates stems to grow longer and stronger, important if you use the blooms in bouquets.

While plants are still young, between 8 and 12 inches tall, take sharp pruners and snip the top 3-4 inches from the plant, just above a set of leaves. I know it's hard. After waiting so long for that growth, the best thing you can do now is snip it off. You'll be removing what will soon become a flowering stem, maybe your first bloom of the season. Call it another truth in gardening that flies in the face of intuition. Making that cut is a lot like ripping off a Bandaid. It will only hurt for a second. Just do it.

For your efforts, the plant will begin to send up multiple stems from below the cut, resulting in more abundant flower production.

Later in the season, if any of those plants start to look leggy, give them another good pinch to encourage more side buds.

Once again, it's all about apical dominance. The end bud of any branch or stem is called the apical bud. This bud releases a hormone called an auxin, which travels by gravity down the stem and keeps all the dormant buds below from growing. Auxins ensure that a plant's tips get a big share of plant resources.

If the apical bud is removed, then dormant buds below on the stem are released from apical dominance and are free to grow out.

Pinching is appropriate for those annuals that produce flowers on multiple stems, including Amaranthus, branching sunflowers, cosmos, dahlias, snapdragons, zinnias, marigolds, impatiens, salvia, coleus, and petunias. For 'one-and-done' annuals like Pro-

cut sunflowers or Bombay celosia (varieties that produce just one flower on each plant), do not use this method.

To keep your annuals blooming all summer, make it a habit to pinch or prune off old flowers as soon as you can. As flowers shed their petals, the plant focuses its resources on seed production, rather than flowers. Removing deadheads regularly will keep the plant producing more and more flowers, and that's always a good thing.