

Deadheading, Pinching, Cutting Back to Extend Bloom, by Shirley Dean

At planting time, many of us already know that **pinching back** the dominant bud of many annuals and perennials will force the plant to put more food and growth hormones into the side branches and make a fuller plant with more flowers. This is most commonly true of plants such as chrysanthemums. The opposite to pinching back is called **disbudding** where the side branches are removed forcing the energy into one show prize bloom for prize dahlias, mums, carnations or peonies.

Many other of our garden plants benefit from **pinching** or **cutting back**. Michelmas Daisies or perennial asters can be pinched back several times or cut back to half in early or mid June. For the taller varieties this means "**knee high by the 4th of July.**" This pinching or cutting back may reduce the need for staking and the seemingly rugged treatment produces a fuller, bushier plant with more bloom. Bloom is usually delayed no more than two weeks. Some plants to try this with are Bee balm (Monarda) usually pinched in May, phlox pinched or cut back in June, Yarrow, Russian Sage, Artemesia, Balloon Flower, Dragon head, Veronica, Culver's Root. Sedum Autumn Joy and other taller sedums such as Chocolate and Purple Emperor benefit from pinching back to about half at this time of year. The pieces pinched off can be stuck right into the ground beside the mother plant.

By **pinching** or cutting back **part** of a plant you can extend the bloom time for at least two weeks. Try staggering a plant randomly or from front to back for a succession of blooms. Stop by mid July.

Do NOT pinch plants with only one terminal flower spike or plants with leaves in a low rosette rather than a long stem. Some plants that do not like pinching are astilbe, columbine, coral bells (heuchera), day lily, dianthus, delphinium, hosta and iris.

While in bloom, continue to **deadhead** both annuals and perennials so they put energy into new blossom rather than setting seed. Remember on **fuschias** to remove not just the blossom but the little seed pod behind that looks like a green pea. Remove the spent blossoms to a bud, a lateral flower or a leaf. This will hide the cut and not spoil the overall look of the plant. Don't deadhead the plants you want to self-seed, to provide seedheads for birds and other wildlife, or provide winter interest with their flower heads, such as hydrangea.

Less common than deadheading during the growing season is **cutting back** to extend bloom or force a repeat bloom. Many perennials such as Echinacea, Shasta Daisies, Rudbeckia, Achillea, Gaillardia, Monarda will produce a second smaller flush of bloom if cut back to lower buds right after blossom. Cranesbill geraniums, tradescantia, Lady's Mantle, Bleedingheart, Nepeta, Euphorbia polychroma, Blue Salvia, Meadow Rue, Silver Mound benefit from hard pruning, as low as 2 inches leaving new growth in the centre a little higher. Cutting back also works for many **annuals** while they are blooming, especially those in hanging baskets and containers. As they pass their peak of beauty, there are two ways to cut back. First is to reduce all branches by approximately 1/3. This will bring your petunias, bacopa, anything scraggly - even begonias- back into balance. This works great if you work in a garden centre and are still trying to sell baskets or containers in June or July or if you are going on holiday

and want to come back to a garden in full bloom. The only down side is the loss of bloom for a few weeks. The other way to do this is to cut back hard **only a few stems at a time** over the course of several weeks. As always, cut back to a lateral stem, bud or leaf and then fertilize. Your petunias, bacopa, lobelia, begonias, Swan River Daisy, etc. will put out a new flush of blooms that will last right up to the frost.