

# Pre-emptive Pruning

BY CAROLE OTTESEN

**W**HEN IT COMES to herbaceous perennials and grasses, most people lump “grooming,” “deadheading,” and “cutting back” into the catchword “pruning,” but there are differences in each of the tasks.

Pruning is a necessity in a perennial garden and almost always performed after the fact—after the winter, after the flowers have come and gone, after the growing season. Grooming removes winter-damaged leaves that detract from an evergreen plant’s appearance. Deadheading removes

Cutting back certain herbaceous perennials and grasses at the right time will yield shapelier, more floriferous plants.

spent flowers in the hopes of more to come. Cutting back eliminates tired foliage and restores the perennial’s neat and youthful basal clump. If you combine this kind of necessary housekeeping with a little weeding, a nutritious top dressing, and mulch, it’s the equivalent of treating your plants to a day at the spa with the works—haircut, massage, manicure, pedicure. It allows perennials to be their best selves, to stay healthy, and to contribute even more beauty to a garden.

But there’s another kind of pruning that is less commonly practiced in the perennial garden, except perhaps among those who still compulsively pinch their old-fashioned chrysanthemums until July 4. You might call it pre-emptive pruning because it takes place *before* anything happens—before a perennial achieves its full potential growth, before bloom. It isn’t strictly necessary, and that is part of its appeal. Pre-emptive pruning transcends



Garden phlox can be kept more compact by cutting them back in late spring or early summer.

mere maintenance and becomes a creative act. It is pruning as art, an adventure that allows certain perennials to grow into their better-than-normal selves. Think of it as the equivalent of taking your plants to a talented plastic surgeon.

That would be *you*. If that thought intimidates you, listen to Tracy DiSabato-Aust,

author of *The Well-Tended Perennial Garden*, which is a must-have manual for anyone who grows perennials. Renowned for performing cosmetic surgery on perennials, she says, “perennials are quite forgiving. The worst thing they’ll do if you prune too much is not bloom for a year.” And they never sue!

## WHAT TO PRUNE

Remember last summer's Joe-Pye weed (*Eutrochium* spp.) with those eight-foot-tall flowers that required a ladder to see? A pre-emptive height-reduction operation would have brought those flowers down to eye level or below. And that killer New England aster (*Sympphyotrichum novae-angliae*) that flopped and smothered everything around it? It would have been an ideal candidate for some well-timed intervention. Some nips and tucks in midsummer would have kept it at a more manageable size and turned it into a better citizen. The same holds true for many ornamental grasses, such as switchgrass (*Panicum virgatum*).

While naturally tall and multi-stemmed plants are the most likely choices for cutting back, DiSabato-Aust has achieved showy results with smaller, more compact plants such as balloon flower (*Platycodon grandiflorus*) and Autumn Joy sedum (*Hylotelephium* 'Herbstfreude'). The latter is not typically cut back because it has a naturally neat, uniform habit. However, pruning this sedum produces a remarkable effect. After pre-emptive pruning, it seems to flow over the ground like a tide of copper flowers.



Many tall herbaceous perennials that flower in late summer and early fall, such as the New England aster (*Sympphyotrichum novae-angliae*) shown here, can be cut back in early to midsummer, when they are about two feet tall, above. By fall, the pruned plants, right, have grown back shorter, with a more sculpted appearance and abundant purple flowers.

## Resources

**Herbaceous Perennial Plants** (3rd edition) by Allan M. Armitage, Stipes Publishing, Champaign, IL, 2008.

**The Perennial Care Manual** by Nancy J. Ondra. Storey Publishing, North Adams, MA, 2009.

**Understanding Perennials** by William Cullina. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Co., New York, NY, 2009.

**The Well-Tended Perennial Garden** (expanded edition) by Tracy DiSabato-Aust. Timber Press, Portland, OR, 2006.

Garden phlox (*Phlox paniculata*) is another plant that DiSabato-Aust enjoys pruning. "You can pinch early or cut it back by one half. Or cut it back by four to six inches when it's in bud. It's a really fun plant to experiment on."

Salvias might also seem to be unexpected candidates for pre-emptive pruning, yet California gardener Betsy Clebsch, author of *The New Book of Salvias*, practices what she calls "creative pruning" on certain species. In addi-

tion to deadheading, she says that to keep the heavy flowering going with a few salvias, "some heavy pruning must be done yearly." According to Clebsch, tender salvias such as *Salvia microphylla*, *S. greggii*, and *S. xjamensis* and their many cultivars "need the protection of old growth until there is no danger of frost. Then they should have heavy wood removed and the whole plant should be cut back to a reasonable size." She cuts *S. microphylla* back to two inches and the others a little less.

Scott Aker, head of horticulture at the U.S. National Arboretum in Washington, D.C., finds that cutting back certain perennials also benefits the gardener. "I like to shear asters, chrysanthemums, dianthus, and rudbeckias in my home garden so that I don't need to spend a lot of time staking them later," he says.

Not all perennials can be pre-emptively pruned, however. For example, crocosmias, torch lilies (*Kniphofia* spp.), and astilbes don't take kindly to it. Nevertheless, most others come out from under the knife with better form, a later and, possibly, longer bloom period, and a shorter, more compact habit.



## TRY YOUR PRUNERS ON THESE PLANTS

The following mid- to late-summer bloomers shape up well after being cut back:

### Botanical name

*Artemisia ludoviciana*  
*Aster tataricus*  
*Asteromoea mongolica*  
(also listed as *Kalimeris mongolica*)  
*Boltonia* spp.  
*Dendranthemum ×grandiflora*  
*Echinacea purpurea*  
*Eutrochium fistulosum*  
*Eutrochium maculatum*  
*Helianthus* spp.  
*Misanthus sinensis*  
*Monarda* spp.  
*Phlox maculata*  
*Phlox paniculata*  
*Rudbeckia nitida*  
*Solidago* spp.  
*Symphotrichum novae-angliae*  
*Symphotrichum novi-belgii*  
*Tricyrtis* spp.

### Common name

white sage  
Tartarian aster  
Mongolian aster  
  
boltonia  
hardy garden chrysanthemum  
purple coneflower  
Joe-Pye weed  
spotted Joe-Pye weed  
perennial sunflower  
misanthus  
beebalm  
wild sweet William  
garden phlox  
shiny coneflower  
goldenrod  
New England aster  
New York aster  
toad lily



### WHEN TO PRUNE

Knowing when to prune plants is crucial for the best results. "In general, plants in your region that normally bloom after the summer solstice are the ones that can be pruned until early July," says Aker. "Don't cut back plants like peonies, that flower in early summer, because they will have already formed flower buds."

Because climate, location, and weather conditions make for enormous differences

in growth and bloom time, DiSabato-Aust gauges the time to cut back late summer- and fall-blooming perennials by size rather than by date. "When a plant reaches roughly 16 to 24 inches," she says, "it can be cut back. Normally it's cut back by half, but sometimes it can be two-thirds of the plant." The more vigorous the plant, the more can be trimmed away. In her experience, the foliage will usually regrow within 10 to 14 days, depending upon the weather.

Pre-emptive pruning does much more than simply limit size. Perennials such as asters can be sculpted into elegant mounds of flowers by cutting the plants shorter around the edges and leaving the center a little taller. Or, for a mass of perennials that all bloom facing in one direction, cutting those in front very short and graduating the plants' heights as you move back will result in a slope of flowers with all plants in view.

To manipulate bloom time, you can cut back portions of a planting to stagger and lengthen overall bloom times by



Autumn Joy sedum, which is generally a tidy plant even without pruning, becomes extraordinarily compact with it.

weeks. Just be careful not to overdo the delaying tactic or you risk losing a year's worth of flowers.

However, "don't be afraid to experiment," advises Aker. "You'll find what works through trial and error."

So as you head out to neaten up the garden this spring and summer, think beyond your usual maintenance chores. You can use your pruners like a scalpel to enhance your plants' natural beauty. And as you snip, chant the mantra "less is more, lessismore, lessizmore."

Carole Ottesen is a contributing writer for The American Gardener. This is an updated version of an article originally published in the March/April 2004 issue of this magazine.