Deadhead for longer bloom times

Source: Rick Durham, extension professor, UK Department of Horticulture

In the garden, the practice of deadheading your plants can promote more blooms.

Plants live to reproduce, and the way they do that is through their flowers. When you remove dead blooms from a plant, you also remove their ovaries. Many plants then take the energy it would have used to produce seeds and put it into producing more flowers, hoping the next time you’ll leave it alone to do its job. Of course, if you want continuous bloom in the garden, you won’t.

From a purely aesthetic perspective, deadheading can improve the looks of your garden by reshaping plants and removing unsightly waste. Not all plants will rebloom after deadheading, such as daylilies and daffodils. In fact, deadheading is used more for annuals than for perennials. However, the practice can still benefit perennials by forcing them to put their energy into the bulb or rhizomes rather than into seed production. This often produces hardier plants that bloom more profusely next year.

Deadheading can also prevent reseeding, which can reduce your time spent weeding later. However, in late summer or early fall, allowing some plants, such as coneflowers, to form seeds can give overwintering birds and other wildlife an important food source.

Deadheading is an easy task and one that you can do as you stroll through your garden on a pleasant summer’s day. Simply pinch or cut off the dead bloom below the flower and above the first set of leaves. Do this to all the dead flowers on the plant. Some perennials, like dianthus, bloom profusely all at once, which means the flowers will fade at the same time. It’s often easier to deadhead these with shears, taking the top one or two inches off the stems. This can stimulate a second bloom, though it will not be as lush as the first bloom.

If you have multiple flowers on a stem, wait until all the flowers have faded, then cut back the main stem.

Some annuals, like petunia and verbena that produce lots of blooms also present a problem when deadheading. It is tedious to remove all the spent blooms. Wait until a natural break in bloom, cut the plants back, and apply fertilizer (only to annuals not to perennials in summer). Make sure there is ample water after fertilization. Many annuals will respond by renewing growth and resuming flowering. Other annuals, like Wave petunias and Profusion zinnias often don’t need to be deadheaded. They will either continue to bloom without your help or are sterile and will not produce seed.

Some perennials that will benefit from deadheading include foxglove, bee balm, hollyhock, coreopsis, butterfly bush, lavender, salvia and scabiosa.

For more information about which plants can benefit from deadheading, contact the (COUNTY NAME) office of the University of Kentucky Cooperative Extension Service.

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