

To Deadhead or Not to Deadhead? That is the Question. (published 2025-07-12)

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We all love and admire a full flowering garden. Think of the pictures and displays in the home and garden magazines and books. Think of your last trip to the city arboretum. Imagine your own garden looking like these gardens. You can do this. To improve the beauty of your own garden a simple maintenance technique can be done to increase and enjoy more flowers in your garden by maximizing the energy of your plants to produce more blooms instead of spending their energy on producing seed. The method is simple but an important practice of regular garden maintenance - deadheading.

Deadheading is the process of removing faded and spent flowers and seed heads to promote new growth and reflowering. There are several reasons for deadheading. The first is to redirect the plants' energy from developing seeds to producing new healthy blooms. This will extend the flowering period for numerous plants as well as enhance the beauty of your garden. When dead blooms are left on flowering plants, they drain the nutrition and strength from the plants and prevent production of new blooms. The deadheading process also redirects the plant's energy from seed production to root and vegetative growth. Some plants will completely stop blooming and may even die because they have completed their life cycle if not deadheaded. However, there are some plants that will only bloom once even if the spent flowers are removed. Leaving spent blooms on the plants not only creates untidiness, but can also promote plant disease such as mildew, mold and insect infestation. Deadheading also prevents the dispersal of seeds when spread is unwanted.

To understand the reasoning behind deadheading, it is necessary to look at the lifecycle of plants. The purpose of any species, whether plant or animal, is to reproduce and ensure the continuation of the species. Simply put, plants use a significant amount of energy to produce flowers to attract pollinators to spread pollen to the ovules of other flowers enabling the plant to develop seeds or seed pods for the purpose of procreation. Even though there are other ways plants can propagate, the primary method is to develop new plants from seeds.

When and how to deadhead flowers is not a complicated science. When the flowers on your plant start to fade and the petals start to fall, it is time to deadhead. Different plants will need deadheading at different times and maybe numerous times. Many annuals in particular need to be deadheaded regularly for continuing blooms. Some examples are petunias, zinnias, marigolds and cosmos. Perennials that benefit from deadheading include gaillardia, monarda, coneflowers and peonies. As a maintenance practice it is advised to observe your garden regularly and deadhead as needed. Common ways to deadhead include pinching off the spent flower just below the flower head and before the first set of leaves. Pulling off petals is not sufficient. For plants with thicker and sturdier limbs or stalks, sharp, clean pruners or scissors will be necessary. Cut at an angle below the spent bloom and above the first set of leaves. A clean cut will help to prevent disease. If the stalk is long with no further blooms, cut the entire stalk. Dispose of the spent blooms.

There are instances when you might not want to deadhead. There are many annual flowers that will reseed in the garden to provide a presence every year. These blooms need to be left alone to

develop seed heads that will drop or spread to reseed the following spring. Or the seeds heads can be collected after they have dried to save for planting the following year. This collection of seeds may be needed in colder climates where the seeds may not live through harsher temperatures. Flowers that easily reseed include cosmos, bachelor buttons, snapdragons, California poppies, zinnias, calendula, columbines, sweet peas, forget-me-nots, portulaca, love-in-a-mist, hollyhocks, petunias, sweet alyssum, larkspur and cleomes.

Another reason for not deadheading, particularly in the fall, is to leave the seed heads intact for wildlife to feed on during the winter months. Rudbeckia, sunflowers, and echinacea are three examples. And lastly, some flowers have interesting and beautiful seed heads, like hydrangeas, that can be left on the plant for winter interest.

References

“Deadheading,” <https://extension.psu.edu/programs/master-gardener/counties/chester/how-to-gardening-brochures/deadheading-1>

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<https://extension.sdstate.edu/enjoy-more-flowers-your-garden-deadheading-regularly>

“To Deadhead or Not? Your Final Answer is...,”
<https://extension.psu.edu/to-deadhead-or-not-your-final-answer-is>

For more information about gardening, visit UTHORT’s YouTube site for helpful videos:
<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCjS3d1IkIH1OZ1Z2qPvhgfQ>

Or Washington County’s YouTube site:
<https://www.youtube.com/@utextensionwashingtoncounty>

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