



July 5, 2022

Contributed by Susie Middleton

THE CHELSEA CHOP

Last week on a District I tour of the Arboretum at Salisbury University, the Head of Culture pointed out a perennial specimen and said he had just given it a “Chelsea Chop” and worried that he might have been too aggressive. I hadn’t heard the term before so asked him what he meant. He said it referred to the practice of cutting back perennials to encourage growth. Interested I came home and looked it up on the internet. The best explanation came from the Fine Gardening Website.

What is it? The Chelsea Chop is a method of pruning that limits the size, controls the flowering season, and often decreases the flopping of a number of herbaceous perennials.

When do I do it? The Chelsea Chop got its name from the famous garden show that takes place in England in late May— which is historically when the pruning method should be used. However, depending on where you live in the country, the chopping is best done in late spring or early summer, or when the plant has a fairly substantial amount of vegetative growth.

What is the upside? Typically plants aren’t as tall or leggy, so they may not need to be staked or supported. The flowers may be smaller but in many cases are more numerous. This happens because the removal of the top shoots enables the side shoots to branch out more.

Are there drawbacks? You can’t do the chop on all summer-blooming plants— for instance, woody shrubs don’t respond well. Also, if your spring has been particularly dry, performing such a drastic pruning may do more harm than good to your plants, sending them into a shock that they may not recover from.

What plants are ideal candidates?

Many summer- and autumn-flowering perennials, such as these, are perfect for the Chelsea Chop.

Garden phlox (*Phlox paniculata* and cvs., Zones 4–9)

Yarrow (*Achillea* spp. and cvs., Zones 3–9)

Bellflower (*Campanula* spp. and cvs., Zones 4–9)

Aster (*Symphotrichum* spp. and cvs., Zones 4–8)

Coneflower (*Echinacea* spp. and cvs., Zones 3–9)

Black-eyed Susan (*Rudbeckia* spp. and cvs., Zones 3–9)

Upright sedum (*Hylotelephium* spp. and cvs., Zones 3–7)

Penstemon (*Penstemon* spp. and cvs., Zones 3–8)

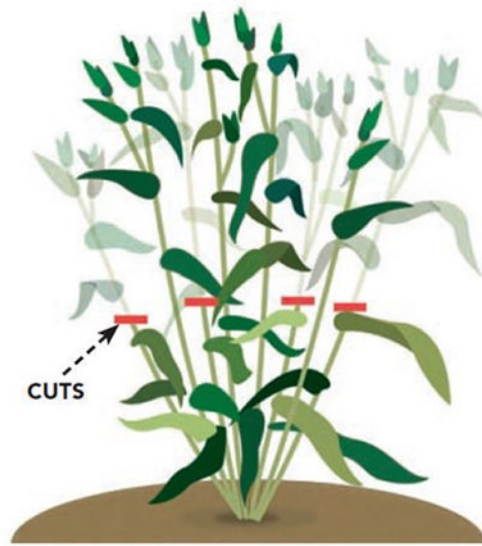
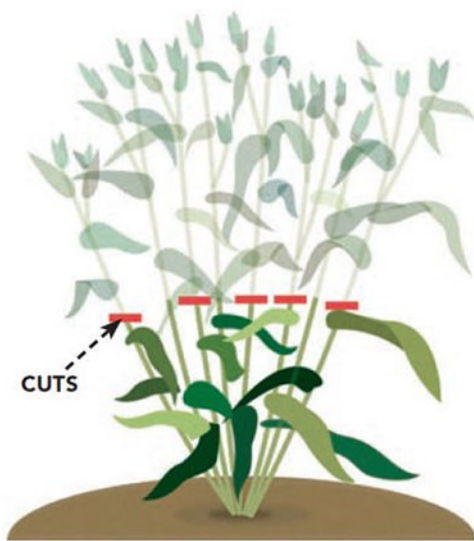
Golden marguerite (*Anthemis tinctoria* and cvs., Zones 3–7)

Sneezeweed (*Helenium* spp. and cvs., Zones 3–8)

Goldenrod (*Solidago* spp. and cvs., Zones 3–9)

Shasta daisy (*Leucanthemum* × *superbum* and cvs., Zones 5–9)

How do I do it?



(Illustrations: Conor Kovatch)

Method 1

Chop back clumps of perennials by one-third to one-half using shears. This will delay the flowering until later in summer and keep plants shorter and more compact.

Method 2

Cut only half the stems back on a plant, which will extend the season of flowering.

Source: <https://www.finegardening.com/article/whats-deal-chelsea-chop>