

Deadheading plants

Deadheading is the term used for the removal of flowers from plants when they are fading or dead. It is done to keep plants looking attractive and encourage more blooms, whether in beds and border, containers or hanging baskets.

Should I Deadhead?

In a pollinator garden, many butterflies and moths make their chrysalis hidden somewhere in the garden. Because of their ability to camouflage themselves, it is impossible to see or find the chrysalis. If you cut the garden back too early, you may be destroying overwintering chrysalids or eggs. There is a great beauty in the over wintering structure of a pollinator garden when you know that it is a nursery for butterflies and grocery store for winter birds. When gardening for wildlife, it is common practice to leave the seed heads throughout winter until the new green growth appears on the plant.

Reasons for deadheading

Most flowers lose their attraction as they fade, spoiling the overall appearance of beds, borders and containers, and are best removed. However, there are other reasons:

- Regular deadheading directs energy into stronger growth and more flowers. Once the flowers are pollinated; seed heads, pods or capsules form at the expense of further growth and flower development
- It can prevent plants with numerous petals, such as **peonies**, some **camellias** and many **roses**, scattering debris widely

When and what to deadhead

Remove the spent flowers as soon as they look scruffy. In practice, gardeners usually have to remove them as soon as they can and, thankfully, a few days delay won't make a difference.

Plants to deadhead

- **Bedding plants:** Tender plants growing in beds, **containers** and **hanging baskets** respond well to deadheading. The faded blooms of argyranthemums, cherry pie, pansies, polyanthus and petunias can be removed with finger and thumb
- **Geraniums (*Pelargonium*):** Hold the faded flower stalk near the base and pull downwards. The old bloom will snap out cleanly
- **Roses:** Gently snap off the faded flowers, breaking the stalk just below the head (also see 'Where to cut' below)
- **Shrubs:** Among the most important shrubs to deadhead are **rhododendron** (and azaleas), **camellias**, lilacs and **tree peonies**. Use finger and thumb to pick or snap off each dead head where it joins the stem or secateurs to cut just below the flower head. Avoid damaging buds or developing growths immediately below the flower
- **Climbers:** Deadhead climbers where practical, particularly *Eccremocarpus* as it rapidly produces seed pods
- **Bulbs:** Remove flowers, along with the seed capsule. However, leave the green flower stalk in place as this photosynthesizes (produces food), helping to build up the **bulb** to flower well next season

How to do it

- **With finger and thumb**

The simplest method is to just pinch off the faded blooms with finger and thumb. Aim to remove the flower with its stalk to ensure the plant looks tidy.

- **With scissors or a knife**

<https://www.rhs.org.uk/advice/profile?PID=129>

To deadhead plants with tough or stringy stems, use scissors or a knife. This includes **dahlias**, calendulas, marigolds and shrubs such as lilac.

Where to cut

- For **border perennials and annuals**, trim away the old flowers, generally cutting back to a bud or leaf
- Some **hardy geraniums, delphiniums and lupins** produce a second flush of flowers if cut back close to ground level. Others, such as lady's mantle and oriental poppies, can still be cut back near ground level but, usually, only produce fresh foliage
- Gently snap off the faded flowers of **roses**, breaking the stalk just below the head (rather than cutting just above a leaf, as the snapping method results in more blooms being produced more quickly on repeat-flowering cultivars)

No need to deadhead?

Should I be deadheading everything? Thankfully, no.

- Some obliging plants do not need deadheading. Typically **fuchsias**, bedding lobelia and salvias either don't set much seed or neatly deadhead themselves
- **Do not remove the faded flowers on plants that produce seeds loved by birds, including Rudbeckia, Echinacea, cornflower and sunflower**
- There is no need to deadhead rose cultivars that bear hips or other plants that bear berries in the autumn
- Leave plants that have ornamental seeds or fruits without deadheading; examples include alliums; love-in-a-mist (*Nigella*), stinking iris (*Iris foetidissima*) and bladder cherry (*Physalis alkekengi*)