

Summer Primping
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While summer seems the best time to sit and admire a garden, few gardeners seem able to pull that off. With 11 sitting areas, I still jump up every three seconds to primp, prune, pull or pluck. Compulsiveness pays off in a more tended appearance, reveals bare soil ripe for replanting and showcases natural plant habits.

Pulling out or heading back dead, leggy annuals and cutting spent spring bulb foliage begins the renovation. Violas, poppies, candy tuft, Clarkia, bolted lettuce, peas... anything brown hits the compost. Dead-heading may stimulate re-bloom in some species -- tickseed for instance. Seed saving and dispersing on the spot assures return of desirable fillers for next spring. Birds forage on the leftovers.

Spruce up herbaceous perennials. Pluck or snip back beyond sight those tattered, chewed-on leaves and watch plants like hostas and heucheras put on new growth. Dead head spent flowers, cutting along the stem to a growing point. Dahlias, Knautia, nepeta, and roses benefit mightily from such treatment.

Woody perennials take light summer pruning. Start from the bottom where new growth encroaches on pathways or covers up front-of-the-border species. Run a hand along the branch you intend to remove to a main branch or trunk and cut flush, but just outside the collar that heals the wound. Squint at shrubs, blurring their image, to help reveal branches out of balance or find the wild hares causing that unkempt look. Reach into the plant and cut as described above.

Go slow. Step back and look from several angles before each cut. Judicious summer pruning of most plants does not stress them unless they are already stressed from lack of water or disease. Summer cuts rarely stimulate outrageous re-growth that spoils the usual point of pruning, which is to gently shape or remove dead material. With the exception of formally clipped hedges, pruning to reduce the mature size of a plant is a fool's errand. Better to replace such mistakes or make room for them.

See "Guide to Pruning" by Cass Turnbull and The American Horticultural Society's "Pruning & Training" by Christopher Brickell and David Joyce for advice on specific plants.