HELPLINE HAPPENINGS
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TO CHOP OR NOT TO CHOP - The Chelsea Chop Explained

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What is the Chelsea Chop?

The Chelsea Chop is a pruning method **used primarily with perennials BEFORE flowering.** It is radical – literally chopping back plants. The “chop” removes the top shoots and enables the side shoots to branch out. The top shoots normally inhibit side shoots by producing hormones in a process called apical dominance.

Gardeners employ the Chelsea Chop (so called because it is usually carried out at the end of May, coinciding with the RHS Chelsea Flower Show) to limit the size and control the flowering season of many herbaceous plants, especially late blooming perennials. The Chelsea Chop enables gardeners to extend the blooming season by staggering blooming times or encouraging plants to rebloom. In addition, this method along with regular feeding and watering ensures that beds and borders look tidy throughout summer.

The Chelsea Chop can also be applied to **some spring blooming perennials AFTER flowering** to remove spent blossoms, refresh the plant and encourage re-blooming.

The Texas Chop – variation on a theme
The Texas Chop is the practice of cutting back **perennials and certain annuals** by one-third to one-half in July **AFTER the initial bloom period** in order to maintain plant compactness, encourage a strong fall bloom and refresh the plant. The Texas Chop addresses the “tired” look that occurs mid-summer. Initially, it may make some plants look even more worn for a few weeks while they regrow, but the fall rewards will be worth it. If you missed the window to Chelsea Chop, the Texas Chop will produce some of the same rewards.

There are two techniques used in the Texas Chop:

- shearing
- strong deadheading - pruning individual flower stalks to a certain height above a set of leaves

Perennials with flower heads or daisy-shaped flowers (purple coneflower, rudbeckia) tend to look decapitated if sheared back leaving awkward stems. Cut these back to a thicker main stem above a set of leaves where new buds are already forming.

PERENNIALS TO SHEAR	PERENNIALS TO DEADHEAD	ANNUALS TO DEADHEAD
Gregg's Mist Flower	Agastache	Cornflower (Bachelor's Buttons)
Salvia farinacea	Echinacea	Gomphrena
Salvia greggii	Monarda (Bee Balm)	Basil (large plants can tolerate shearing)
Texas Rock Rose	Rudbeckia	Zinnias
Caryopteris	Shasta Daisies	Purple Hyacinth Bean
Artemesia	Achillea (Yarrow)	
Salvia nemorosa	Gaillardia	
Nepeta (Catmint)	Butterfly Bush	
Verbena		
Texas aster		
Mexican Bush Sage (lightly)		
Mexican Mint Marigold		

Why do the Chelsea Chop?

By chopping either a section or a whole plant, the chopped section of the plant will produce side shoots bearing extra flowers which will bloom a few weeks later than uncut growth and extend the display into autumn.

The Chelsea Chop:

- produces more flowers, though smaller in size, and later than usual
- extends the flowering season into autumn
- limits plant size, encourages compact growth, reduces need for staking
- decreases flopping of tall perennials
- ensures that beds and borders look tidy throughout summer

The Chelsea Chop can be used to great effect to create peak season combinations. It often allows plants that do not normally bloom in tandem with each other to reach their peak at a similar time.

When to do the Chelsea Chop?

Timing for the Chelsea Chop depends on the region:

– best done in our region at the end of May or in early June
(coincides with the Chelsea Flower Show which gave the technique its name)
– when plants are experiencing a fairly substantial amount of vegetative growth
– on cool, shady day, to reduce stress on plants

Water and lightly fertilize after chopping.

NOTES:
Plants that get the Chelsea Chop may produce smaller flowers, but there will be more of them.

The later in the season that the cuts are made, the later the plants will bloom. In regions with a short growing season, chop before the end of May.

Make cuts using sharp, clean scissors, pruning shears or hedge shears. Clean cuts mean less plant stress and quicker healing.

How to do the Chelsea Chop?

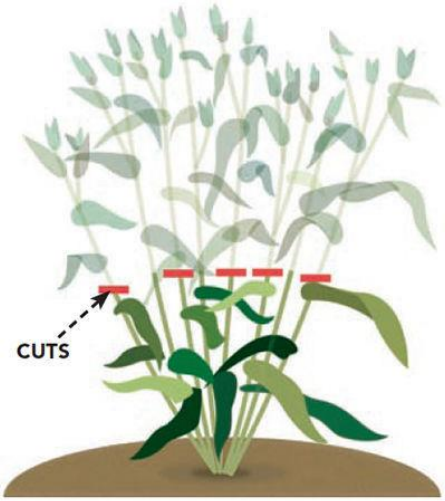
There are two methods for the Chelsea Chop – one more drastic than the other:

Method 1 – CHOP all the stems of late blooming perennials by one-third to one-half
– delays the flowering until later in summer and keep plants shorter and more compact
– use pruner for small gardens or small plant clumps
– use shears for large gardens, large clumps or drifts

Method 2 – STAGGERED CHOP only half the stems of late blooming perennials by one-third to one-half
– prolongs overall flowering time
– extends the season of flowering rather than delaying it

Staggering is a variation of the Chelsea Chop in which one-third to one-half of a plant is cut back in sections over two-week intervals. Picture a drift of beebalm. Instead of cutting it all back at one time, cut back one section in spring, wait two weeks, cut back another section. If you have a long growing season, you could wait another two weeks and cut a third section. Staggering the chopping weeks will stagger the flowering time and result in a longer bloomtime experience. For multiple clumps of one species, cut back some clumps, but leave other clumps untouched. Experiment is key.

CHOP



STAGGERED CHOP

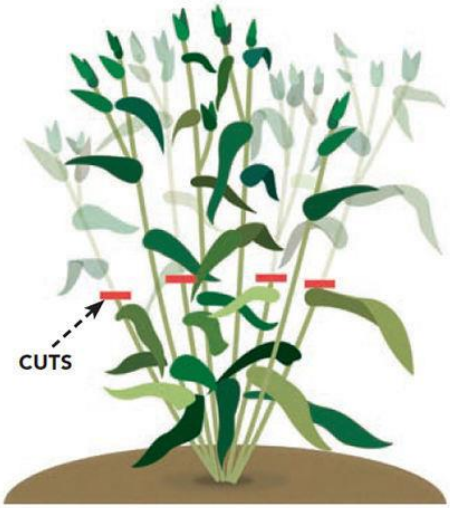


Illustration: Conor Kovatch

Plants that benefit from the Chelsea Chop

Many herbaceous perennials are suitable candidates - especially taller, later-flowering perennials (phlox, sedum, solidago and veronicastrum).

Prairie or meadow plants respond best to the Chelsea Chop because they evolved in response to being eaten (asters, Campanula lactiflora (milky bellflower), echinacea, eupatorium, helenium, rudbeckias, sedums).

Chopping spring-flowering perennials will flush new leaves and encourage re-blooming as long as the plant has not set seed.

Be hard but kind: follow the Chelsea Chop with a good soak and a little fertilizer, compost or mulch.

Limitations:
The Chelsea Chop cannot be done on all summer-blooming plants. Woody plants do not respond well.

If the spring has been particularly dry, performing such a drastic pruning may do more harm than good to the plants, sending them into a shock from which they won't recover.

Partial list of plants that benefit from the Chelsea chop

Achillea – Yarrow
Aconitum
Aegopodium
Alcea
Anchusa
Anthemis tinctoria (golden marguerite)
Asters
Boltonia – false aster
Campanulas – bellflower
Centranthus – red valerian
Chrysanthemums
Coreopsis – tickseed
Echinacea – coneflower
Eupatorium – Joe Pye weed
Gypsophila – baby's breath
Hylotelephium – stonecrop
Helenium spp. – sneezeweed
Leucanthemum – Shasta daisy
Monarda – bee balm
Nepeta (catmint)
Penstemon – beard tongue
Perovskia – Russian sage
Phlox paniculata – garden phlox
Physostegia virginiana –obedient plant
Pycnanthemum –mountain mint
Rudbeckia – Black–eyed Susan
Salvias – salvia
Solidago – goldenrod
Stokesia – Stokes aster
Tanacetum – chamomile
Veronica – speedwell

Plants that benefit from a staggered Chelsea Chop

Partial list of plants that benefit from a staggered Chelsea chop

Agastache – hyssop	Coreopsis – tickseed
Helenium – sneezeweed	Phlox paniculata – garden phlox
Asters --	Eurybia – white wood aster
Monarda – beebalm	Solidago – goldenrod
Boltonia – false aster	Euthamia – grass-leaved goldenrod
Oligoneuron – stiff-leaved goldenrod	Symphyotrichum – American asters

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