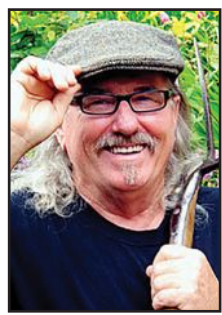


Felder Rushing

Tired of leggy perennials flopping over? Got to get out the ladder to reach ready-to-eat okra? Time for the Chelsea chop, which is a special pruning technique, not an English dance style.

later-blooming roses, gardenias, camellias, vitex, crape myrtle, althaea (rose of Sharon), and abelia, require occasional neatening.

Even cutting those to just a foot or so tall won't kill them, as anyone who has ever tried to get rid of an old holly, fig, or crape myrtle knows; they just keep sprouting back out. We horticulturists call this "rejuvenation" pruning, and the plants usually recover from this very quickly. And because the roots are still intact the new growth is really vigorous, it is important to go back and snip the tips off the new growth to get it to bush out instead of shooting straight up overhead.



FELDER RUSHING

I have never been known as clip-happy, routinely pruning shrubs to maintain a false semblance of control. In fact, I have just one boxwood in my garden that is kept tight and round like a meatball, mostly as a foil to the natural look of everything else and partly to show neighbors that I at least know how to. Sorta like, in what Paul Harvey used to call selective indignation, how I keep my face cleanly shaved and moustache trimmed as a foil to my decades-long hair.

But some plants simply need to be reined in. They get too big or crowded for where they are planted or have winter or insect or disease-damaged growth, or fruit that can't be reached. Foundation shrubs, especially hollies and boxwoods, easily get overgrown. But many flowering shrubs, including azaleas, spirea, forsythia, and hydrangea, and

This can be done up until August, and the plants will recover by fall. However, spring bloomers like azaleas, flowering quince, and climbing roses need more time for new growth to mature and set spring flower buds before fall; best to not prune spring bloomers after July.

But what about herbaceous flowering perennials and annuals that get tall and leggy and flop over



COMPACT CHELSEA CHOPPED MUM

just when they come into bloom? Cutting them back early in the season can make them branch out with more flowering stems on sturdier plants and can delay some flowering so you get a longer bloom season. This has been done for centuries, but lately you may have heard this called the Chelsea chop, because in England it is done around the same time as the mid-spring Chelsea Flower Show.

Not all plants benefit from

this, but I routinely chop back my Clara Curtis and other mums, New England asters, yarrow, mint, tall perennial sunflowers, hibiscus, upright sedums like Autumn Joy, perennial salvias, and my pollinator-laden goldenrods. I cut those halfway or so this month lest they go crazy and overpower things, then flop over just when they start to flower.

I generally leave some plants in a group unpruned, just cutting back some in



COMPACTED CHELSEA CHOPPED ASTER

the front or on the sides of a clump, so I get flowers longer. When the tall ones finish flowering, I may cut them back and get another flush later. And I often do this to my tall annuals like zinnias, basil, coleus, and even okra.

It's worth mentioning that the clippings of most of these herbaceous plants can be rooted quite easily. Short stems of basil, rosemary, coleus, and even gardenias can grow roots in a glass of wa-

ter in just two weeks! The first time someone tries the Chelsea chop is nerve-racking, but the satisfying results the rest of the summer and fall make it become a routine spring chore.

Felder Rushing is a Mississippi author, columnist, and host of the "Gestalt Gardener" on MPB Think Radio. Visit his blog at felderrushing.blog. Email gardening questions to rushingfelder@yahoo.com.

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