

Garden Maintenance: The Care and Cutting of Herbaceous Plants

AT JENKINS, WE GARDEN NOT JUST FOR HUMAN ENJOYMENT, BUT FOR THE SUPPORT AND survival of wildlife, too. Our approach to gardening in partnership with nature informs everything we do, from pruning to planting, weeding to pest management, propagating to watering, and everything in between. This style of naturalistic gardening frequently requires us to think differently about conventional garden maintenance.

For many years, the popular approach to maintaining herbaceous plants included cutting back and disposing of debris as soon as the plants stopped performing for the season. To do otherwise was to leave your garden messy and unkempt. This philosophy has evolved in recent years as maintenance practices and culture adjust to recognize the importance of seedheads, stems, and flowers for the survival of birds and insects.

Not only do stems and seeds provide food and shelter for wildlife in winter, but they also add beautiful texture and architecture to the dormant garden. Maintaining sturdy stems that don't appear messy begins many months before winter sets in. Pruning herbaceous perennials in summer can help set you up for success in winter months. The horticulture team at Jenkins maintains a variety of herbaceous settings, with the bulk of work performed in summer and fall.

SUMMER MAINTENANCE

The team begins by assessing key plants and identifying locations to prune in early summer, the time at which plants push their greatest amount of growth. Throughout the summer, our horticulture team and volunteers perform stadium pruning of perennials growing en masse, as in the

wildflower gardens along the pond fence and the newly revitalized Upper Wildflower Garden. Stadium pruning is a maintenance style in which you trim plants closest to the path or garden edge lowest and gradually increase the height of plants farther back. The method is named after the stadium seating it replicates, with plants increasing in height as you look deeper into the garden bed. Due to their varying forms and heights, clusters of different plant species are cut separately. All stems which are pruned are left with at least one set of leaves intact so they can continue growing, resulting in sturdy, multi-stemmed plants with many blooms.

Keep in mind, this style of pruning herbaceous perennials is not one size fits all! Branching perennials growing in clusters benefit from summer pruning, especially if they tend to flop over by mid-to-late summer. White wood asters (*Eurybia divaricata*) growing along the paths at Jenkins are pruned to encourage branching for more flowers, and to prevent overly long stems from falling into the path or blocking the plants behind them. Other perennials that benefit from pruning are sunflowers (*Helianthus* spp.), bee balms (*Monarda* spp.), mountain mints (*Pycnanthemum* spp.), and more. In contrast, plants that bloom on terminal spikes—such as gayfeather (*Liatris*

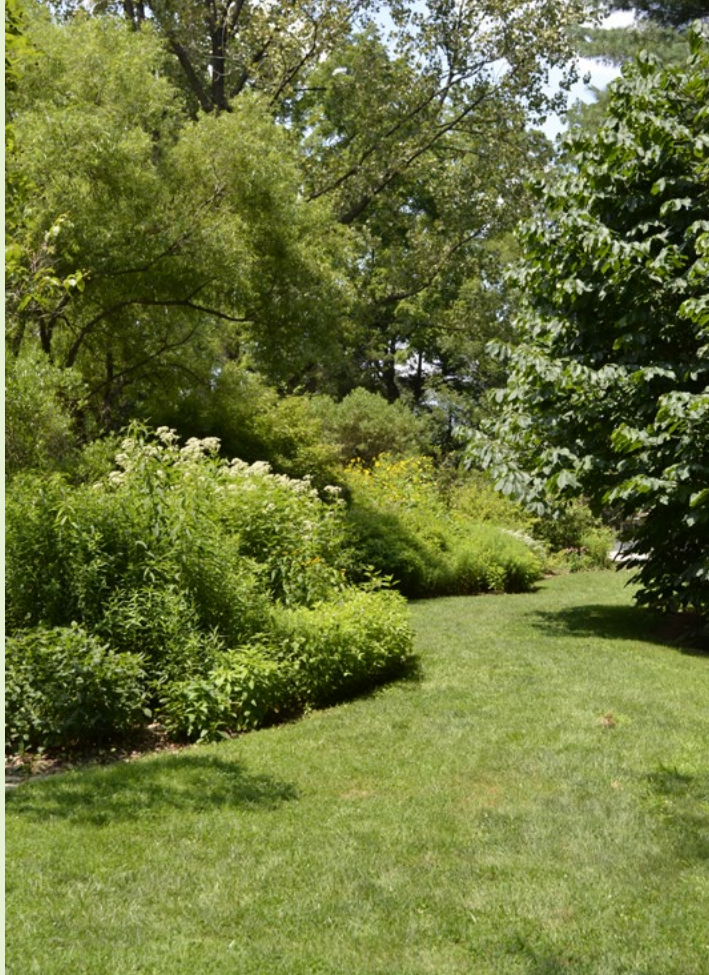
spicata), turtlehead (*Chelone* spp.), and cup plant (*Silphium perfoliatum*)—should not be pruned in summer as they may not put out new growth with flower buds.

FALL MAINTENANCE

Stems that have been cut back in summer prove to be sturdier later into the season. Fall is the prime season to leave as many herbaceous stems for wildlife as possible. Birds require seedheads for nutrition, either in preparation for migration or in preparation for our northeastern winter, when food



White wood aster (*Eurybia divaricata*)



Stadium pruning in the garden—shorter in front and taller in back



Leave stems in your garden to support wildlife

sources are limited. In late summer and early fall, you can often spot goldfinches in the wildflower gardens at Jenkins, gorging on the seeds of hyssop (*Agastache* spp.), coneflower (*Echinacea* spp.), and wild bergamot (*Monarda fistulosa*) as they build their fat stores to survive the winter. Many native insects survive winter by burrowing in or under clusters of dried stems and laying eggs in them. Prematurely removing these stems for aesthetic purposes removes critical habitat that supports birds and insects.

Throughout the fall, our horticulture team cuts back plants which grow easily from seed, including white wood aster (*Eurybia divaricata*), goldenrods (*Solidago* spp.), golden ragwort (*Packera aurea*), and golden alexanders (*Zizia aurea*), to prevent overspreading in the garden. These pruned stems and their bursting seedheads are carefully moved to naturalized areas of the Arboretum and dispersed to create new

areas of herbaceous plants. The other stems which were not pruned will remain through the winter until early spring, at which time they will be cut back to varying lengths. Cut debris is then spread in the gardens for birds to gather as they build spring nests, and to provide shelter for insects looking to lay eggs.

At Jenkins, we are intentional about the timing and type of maintenance we perform to ensure the gardens are enjoyable for visitors while also serving as robust habitat for our native wildlife. Early summer pruning ensures sturdier stems that can support abundant seedheads through fall and winter; in spring, the stems and seedheads are finally cut back, providing nesting material for birds and shelter for insects. Try these methods in your backyard for happy herbaceous plants, and a healthy habitat.



Insect exit holes in a dried stem