

Extension Notes

Personal Column for June 8, 2010

By Gary Hall, Iowa State University Regional Extension Education Director

Making More Flowers: Deadheading and Fertilizing

It is a fact that some plants will bloom more profusely if the old, spent flowers are removed, a process called deadheading. Annuals especially, focus their energy on seed production to insure that the species survives. If you remove old flowers, the energy normally used to produce seed is now available to produce more flowers. Perennials can also benefit by lengthening the blooming season. However, some gardeners enjoy the look of spent flowers of perennials such as sedum or purple coneflower. Also, the seed produced can be a good food source for birds.

Not all plants need to be deadheaded, including sedum 'Autumn Joy', melampodium, impatiens, most flowering vines, Lythrum, and periwinkle (Catharanthus). Those that do increase bloom in response to deadheading include hardy geraniums, coreopsis, petunias, marigolds, snapdragons, begonias, roses, campanulas, blanket flowers, delphiniums, zinnias, sweet peas, salvia, scabiosa, annual heliotrope, geraniums (Pelargonium), and yarrow.

Deadheading is easily accomplished by removing spent flowers. With some plants, pinching between a thumb and finger can do this, but tough, wiry stems will require a scissors or pruning shears.

Modern annual flowers have been bred to flower early and over a long period of time. Providing nitrogen through the growing season can help maintain an effective flower display for warm-season flowers.

Apply a high nitrogen fertilizer four to six weeks after flowers have been set out. Additional fertilizations every four to six weeks can be helpful during a rainy summer, or if flower beds are irrigated. Here are some common nitrogen fertilizers. Use only one of the listed fertilizers and apply at the rate given below.

- Nitrate of soda (16-0-0): Apply 2/3 pound (1.5 cups) fertilizer per 100 square feet.
- Blood Meal (12-1.5-.6): Apply 14 ounces (1.75 cups) fertilizer per 100 square feet.
- Urea (46-0-0): Apply 4 ounces (½ cup) fertilizer per 100 square feet.
- Ammonium Sulfate (21-0-0): Apply 0.5 pounds (1 cup) fertilizer per 100square feet.

If you cannot find the above materials, you can use a lawn fertilizer that is about 30 percent nitrogen (nitrogen is the first number in the set of three) and apply it at the rate of 1/3 pound (3/4 cup) per 100 square feet. One caution here...be absolutely sure that the lawn fertilizer does not contain an herbicide.

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Contact: Gary Hall, 2023 S Federal Ave, Mason City, IA 50401, 641-425-3116,
garyhall@iastate.edu