

Spring Garden Management

In the summer rainfall regions, the growing season is almost upon us, and many plants require some form of management to ensure healthy growth through spring and summer. A judicious snip helps to shape a plant, gets rid of dead and old wood, and encourages a flush of leaves along the stems.

Guidelines:

- Less is best; err on the lighter side rather than cutting off too much if you are at all unsure about how much and when to cut.
- Prune while a plant is dormant - mid- to late winter in the summer rainfall regions, and autumn in the winter rainfall region.
- Make cuts that encourage outward growth.
- Prune fine-leaved, fast-growing and frequently flowering plants lightly and regularly, even during flowering if needed. Broader leafed plants and strong growing species like Plumbago and Tecoma are more forgiving and can be pruned harder and less frequently depending on the desired shape. In general, you won't prune plants (except for deadheading) during flowering unless they are unbearably out of shape. Some species flower non-stop, so there's no point in waiting for them to be out of bloom!

Autumn/ September pruning:

Leonotis, *Hypoestes*, *Protea cynaroides* and *Buddlejas* are natural re-sprouters and can be pruned back hard.

- *Buddleja*: Trim back *Buddleja auriculata* if needed and only as it finishes flowering in September, and *B. salviifolia* in October; the *Buddlejas* can be pruned by up to a third if the shape or entire shrub needs freshening up.
- *Hypoestes aristata* if not done already; my shrubs are shooting up already after the recent showers. Cut down almost to ground level.
- *Leonotis* species: cut back hard. The Wild Dagga flowers beautifully for around 5 years, then may need replacing if shrubs become too woody with reduced flower displays.
- *Protea* and *Leucospermum* hate their root systems being interfered with, but flowering stems do need to be cut back to ground level to ensure good batch of blooms the following year.
- *Pycnostachys urticifolia* needs a hard prune otherwise plants quickly become woody with just a few leaves and flowers high up on their branch tips.

- *Plectranthus* shrubs, like *P. ecklonii* and *P. saccatus* bush beautifully if cut back by a third.
- *Barleria obtusa* if not done already.
- *Coleonema pulchellum* after flowering in October.
- *Salvia dolomitica* flowers in late spring through summer, but an end of winter prune does encourage vigorous new growth. *Salvia africana-caerulea* though is on show now until Dec. /Jan, after which should be pruned.
- Small woody species like the *Euryops* daisy will need some cutting back after the Sept/ Oct flowering session to encourage leaf growth from the ground up.
- *Felicia filifolia* – after flowering in September.
- *Bauhinia galpinii* can be cut back to neaten if necessary or to encourage bushier growth.
- *Hypericum revolutum* can be cut back hard if sprawling out of its allotted space.

Perennials:

- Divide *Gerbera jamesonii* and *Kniphofia praecox* in spring if reduced flowering indicates clumps need reinvigorating.
- *Chlorophytum saundersiae* often look tatty by this time; refresh the plants with a ground-level haircut.
- Many gardeners trim *Dietes grandiflora* and *Aristea ecklonii* at the end of winter. I prefer to cut off dying brown leaves and old flower stalks leaving the rest of the plants intact.
- *Asparagus densiflorus* ‘Meyersii’ and ‘Sprengeri’ – frost damaged fronds can be cut back to ground level at the end of winter and they will re-sprout quickly in spring.
- Deciduous *Agapanthus* spp. can be split now; they do best if split every 3 – 5 years, but wait until late summer to split evergreen varieties.
- All groundcovers will need constant trimming – they are strong feeders as they grow fast, especially in the spring rains, so feed, deadhead and give a short haircut now and then.

Grasses:

Grasses can be pruned down to ground level to mimic a fire burn. This effectively rejuvenates the plants while clearing away the accumulation leaf litter which can smother and hamper the emergence of your grassland forbs.

Plants will literally grow again before your eyes once the rains arrive. In fact, your grassland patch can now be slashed, but do it in sections rather than the entire area to ensure there is

still protective foliage for wildlife. Start from the centre and move outward to give animals a chance to escape to surrounding areas.

In frosty areas: cut back wild grasses at the end of winter; landscape architect, Emmarie Otto, who lives on a farm on the outskirts of the city of Mogale in Gauteng, suggests the best time to do it in her area is just before spring arrives, i.e. at the end of August when the new growth starts. She recommends using the cuttings as mulch to break down gradually providing nutrients through the season. This forms a natural feeding system and, in open areas, protects soil nutrients from depletion by the sun. Adding rich compost or commercial bark mulch does not benefit a grassland garden.

Climbers:

- *Senecio tamoides* is a heavy and dense climber that may need to be cut down to the ground. Plants germinate quite readily around the garden and existing clumps will re-grow quickly from the root.
- *Senecio macroglossus* – this is a small creeper, so a light prune is all that is needed.
- Frost may have damaged *Thunbergia alata* beyond saving, but you should find new plants germinating in spring. If your plant doesn't look too bad, cut right back and give it a chance to recover.
- Prune back *Clematis brachiata* before spring while still dormant.
- *Jasminum multipartitum*: wait until flowering comes to an end in January before pruning this lovely fragrant creeper.

Water plants:

- *Dissotis canescens/princeps* can be cut back to ground level at the end of winter.
- Cut *Juncus effuses* to ground level if frost damaged.

Frost damaged plants: Damaged sections can be cut off once all danger of frost is past.

Finally, reinvigorate large shrubs and climbers that have not been pruned for a few years, but do so gradually, in small increments to ensure continued growth. Dead seed heads can be cut off as the weather warms to allow the plant to put its energies into new growth.