

4.4 Pruning techniques

All herbaceous perennials and ornamental grasses that die back in winter can be cut back, either in autumn or spring [1, 2]. Trimming perennials after flowering finishes will help improve their appearance, and will also improve their flowering the following year. However, you can leave some stems over winter to provide homes and food for wildlife, and then trim back in spring. Evergreen perennials and ornamental sedges are not cut back, but are tidied during spring and summer by removing dead foliage. More tender plants with woody stems, such as penstemons, are left so that the old stems protect the crown from frost. Leave pruning of these and other borderline-hardy perennials until the risk of frost has passed – usually April or May.

4.4.1 Cutting back after flowering

Early-flowering perennials are cut to near the base after flowering to encourage fresh foliage and late summer flowering. These are then cut back again in autumn or spring.

- Using a knife, shears or secateurs, cut stems close to the ‘crown’ or dormant base of the plant
- If there is any young growth, cut to just above it
- Any attractive dead stems or flower heads can be left until early spring
- Remove diseased material (showing signs of leaf-spots, mildew and rusts, for example).

4.4.2 Cutting back in spring

Dead herbaceous plants and grasses over winter to provide structure and interest, as well as food and shelter for wildlife. However, more care is needed when cutting back in spring to avoid damaging new shoot growth. In case of earlier-than-expected growth of perennials in spring, rather than cutting out new growth, merely tidy up the plants by pulling out dead stems.

- Using a knife, shears or secateurs cut stems close to the ‘crown’ or dormant top of the plant, avoiding the removal of new shoots
- In spring, new growth arises from the base of herbaceous plants (including grasses) that die back to ground level over winter. This is best not removed during cutting back
- Evergreen perennials, or those such as penstemons, that should survive the winter in milder areas, may either shoot from the base or from branching points higher up the old shoots. Where growth arises purely from the base, cut the old stems back entirely to within a few centimetres of the base, leaving the new shoots open to light and air. Where growth arises higher up, simply shorten the old stems, cutting to just above a healthy leaf, branch or bud

[NEXT CHAPTER](#)
[BACK TO INDEX](#)