

Summer Sizzlers in the Garden

By Susan Camp

The heavy rains over the Memorial Day weekend spoiled a lot of family beach weekends meant to kick off the summer season, but the wet weather was a boon to those of us who rely on some type of irrigation system to nurture our flower and vegetable gardens through the summer. The rain weighted down the perennials and shrubs, and rose petals now litter the walkway, but the plants will bounce back, and their thirst has been slaked for at least a week. I am comforted by the fact that our rain barrel is full.

This is the period of the growing season when I struggle with what is known as the “Chelsea Chop,” so named for the Royal Horticultural Society Chelsea Garden Show that occurs annually around the end of May. The Chelsea Chop is a pruning method that was devised to reduce the size of certain perennials that grow leggy and floppy over the summer.

The technique is not difficult. Using shears, prune clumping perennials back by 1/3 to 1/2 to control their height and to keep them from flowering until later in the summer. An alternative method is to cut back only half the stems on a perennial, which will prolong the flowering through the summer months. The Chelsea Chop is not appropriate for all perennials. Candidates for the Chelsea Chop include coneflowers, asters, garden phlox, goldenrod, catmint, yarrow, and bee balm. Woody perennials and subshrubs do not respond well to this technique.

Even knowing that certain perennials will grow floppy and require staking by July, I hesitate to start chopping away when they are just beginning to bloom and the bees and butterflies are flocking to them. I have no problem cutting back the oregano and lemon balm because they aren't flowering yet, and I remove the longest stems from the catmint and catnip, leaving plenty of blossoms for the bees.

Not all of our perennials are tall. We have smaller plants in front of and tucked between the taller ones. A favorite small perennial is the dainty columbine (*Aquilegia*), a member of the buttercup family. More than 70 species exist, including several native columbines. Numerous cultivars are available. *Aquilegia caerulea* with white petals and blue sepals is the state flower of Colorado, but we have a native columbine in Eastern North America: *Aquilegia canadensis* with yellow petals and pink to blood-red sepals that trail the red spurs characteristic of the plant. The delicate, lacy, blue-green leaves resemble the foliage of rue.

A. canadensis can reach a height of 2 to 3 feet with a spread of 1 to 2 feet, although the height is often much lower. Columbine requires average, well-drained soil in full sun to part shade. Deadhead the flowers to encourage new blooms. Columbine self-seeds prolifically. The plant

will die back to the ground in winter, but will return each spring for many years of pleasure. Leaf miners can deface the foliage. Overhead watering can lead to fungal leaf spot and powdery mildew.

The genus *Gaillardia* contains about 30 annuals, biennials, and perennials native to Central and Western North America. *Gaillardia aristata*, commonly called blanket flower or Indian blanket, is a colorful summer perennial in the Aster family with daisy-like yellow and orange-red petals and grayish-green leaves. 'Arizona Sun' is a popular cultivar in the garden and for use in flower arrangements.

'Arizona Sun' grows to 6 to 12 inches in height with a spread of 12 to 18 inches. It requires full sun and rich, moist, well-drained soil, but will tolerate poor soil, heat, humidity, and drought. Deadhead plants regularly to keep them blooming. Poor drainage can lead to root rot, especially during periods of heavy rain. Powdery mildew, leaf spot, leaf miners, and aphids can cause problems.

Other cheerful, low-growing summer perennials include *Coreopsis verticillata* 'Zagreb' and *Packera aurea* (golden ragwort).

Find detailed information on these and other summer sizzlers in the Missouri Botanical Garden Plant Finder and NC State Extension Gardener Plant Toolbox.

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