

## The Good Looking Garden, by Harriett McMillan, Echter's Nursery and Garden Center

It has probably been a few weeks since you planted your flower beds and containers and hasn't it been fun watching your plants grow and flower. Every year is a little different depending on weather conditions and what plants you choose from year to year. One thing that does not change is the basic maintenance that keeps plants in the best condition to look their best into the weeks of summer and beyond. One of the easiest things to do to keep your flower display fresh and to encourage continuing flowering is "deadheading" your plants. This practice is simply removing flowers as they fade or wither. Deadheading keeps plants looking fresh and encourages flower buds-in-waiting to emerge and to continue forming. All flowers in their life cycle will develop into seed and if plants begin to set a surplus of seed, the formation of new buds will decline as the plant's energy is being channeled into seed production. So, for more flowers over the summer, keep removing spent flowers.

Flower production is also enhanced by regular fertilization, especially with annuals. Timed release fertilizers are convenient to use and can provide fertilization over several months. They can be incorporated into the soil at planting time. Water soluble fertilizers are another option and for annuals they are most effective when applied every two to three weeks. Regular watering is an important component in keeping containers and flower beds in good condition. Applying water at ground level is the best technique. Overhead watering is wasteful because of evaporation and the quality of flowers and foliage can be compromised. Water on foliage can lead to disease problems, especially powdery mildew. Most flower beds and containers will do well with a good, thorough watering every four to six days, depending on weather conditions. It is better to water deeply when watering, avoiding shallow frequent watering.

Weed control is an important facet of overall maintenance; weeds are the uninvited visitors in your garden and they not only look out of place, they are competing for moisture and nutrient. The easiest of the weeds to control are annual weeds, such as spurge, purslane, lambsquarters, kochia and wild buckwheat. Annual weeds are easy to pull as they appear and they will appear regularly as there are seeds in the soil that are just waiting for sun and water to encourage their germination. The perennial weeds are a little more of a challenge because they emerge from an established crown and often are a little more difficult to pull if they are well established. Dandelions, thistle, bindweed and common mallow fall into this category. Eliminating these weeds before establishing a flower bed is your best strategy. Check with your weed specialist at your independent garden center for a weed control plan.

Applying a light layer of mulch around plants after planting is helpful in weed control, as the mulch shades the open soil and helps retard the germination of weed seeds. Mulch also provides a finishing touch to a planting, helping to highlight attractive foliage and flowers. In addition, mulch aids in the conservation of moisture in the soil, especially in extreme heat.

One final note regarding the other unwanted guests that will undoubtedly appear in your garden; these include aphids, grasshoppers, slugs, blister beetles, trip and mites – among others.

There is little that can be done to prevent insects, they are a part of the natural world and are a presence, often unseen but at times annoying and damaging to plants. Control of insects includes simple techniques such as washing away aphids with a strong spray of the hose. In other cases you may choose to apply an insecticide for control – the choices are varied and your independent garden center professional can advise you on what will be your best solution for your specific problem.

Gardening is a pleasure and at times a chore, but spending some time at the chores can provide the pleasure. The time you spend deadheading and weeding puts you in the garden, observing the plants and noting possible problems as they appear so you are able to source a solution to a problem quickly. Above all, a garden is an evolution through the season, changing from day to day and a welcome reward for your effort in planting and care.