

Pruning and deadheading Herbs

Plants have a primary goal: to flower, set seeds and die (or die back in the case of perennials). Pinching the flower buds as they form will redirect the plants energy into creating more leaves to eat. Herb flowers are beautiful and bees love them but if you plan to harvest herbs for culinary use it is best to harvest the leaves before the flowers appear, or to not allow them to flower at all. Once the flowers set, the herbaceous parts of the plant can become woody and less flavorful.

Letting herbs flower: If you have lots of herbs and do not mind some going to flower the bees and other insects will be very grateful as herbs flowers are some of their favorites, especially the tiny florets such as those on thyme, dill, and coriander. Many herb flowers like mint, anise, licorice, hyssop, bee balm, and lavender are also edible and delicious. Try adding them to salads or decorate a cake with them!

- Flower buds on summer annual herbs such as basil, lemon basil, and lemon balm to name a few, can be simply pinched off between finger and thumb, just below the base of the flower or just above a set of leaves (leaf bract). Alternatively, use scissors or florists' snips.
- Tender annual herbs like basil can be pruned or pinched every few week to encourage lateral branching and bushier plants. Pinch or cut all of the growth leaders to just above a leaf bract to encourage lateral growth. You only need to leave a few leaves or branches at the bottom of the plant with each harvest, basil is a prolific grower as long as the weather is warm. Eat or dry your trimmings!
- Plants which produce masses of flowers, like creeping lavender or thyme can be given a 'haircut' with hedge clippers or scissors as soon as the flowers lose their color. This will encourage fresh new growth and possibly a second round of blooms if you get to them early enough. The leaves can be harvested any time but have the best flavor before they go to flower.
- Tall running herbs like bee balm or mints can be simply snipped off below the flower and above the next healthy leaf bract. New leaves will likely form to either side of the leaf bract.
- Mounded perennial herbs such as oregano and chives, will give a second round of edible fresh greenery and possibly even blossoms if you cut them back to a few inches above the ground just before the flowers fade. You'll see the new growth forming at the base of the plant even as the flowers above are blooming. Cut the old growth back to the ground leaving the new growth to produce a second harvest.
- Woody perennial herbs like sage, lavender and rosemary benefit from deadheading the flowers. Cut below the flower and above the next healthy leaf bract. The leaves can be harvested any time but have the best flavor before they go to flower.



Basil flower bud



Pinch or cut the flower bud and stem to just above the next set of leaves (this is the leaf bract). You can eat the flowers and buds of basil.