

Cutting Down and Clearing Up

Bob Brown

There's no great hurry. You just need to do it before regrowth starts or it's so much fiddlier. Meanwhile, you can enjoy the visual effects and the Coldcrests can swarm over the seed heads. I start by cutting down crocosmias and pokers which only ever die messily. If I have time I've cut aquilegias back long ago before they have seeded. I leave the best, like most grasses, phlox with its stiff bleached stems and *Sedum* 'Herbstfreude' whose colour persists beyond midwinter if you're lucky, till last. In fact I often run out of winter before the job is finished - it's no big deal. No-one but me notices a few of last year's dead stems amongst the flowers in the summer.

Christopher Lloyd at Great Dixter used to insist that old stems should be literally cut to the ground - "No tags". The temptation is to leave six inches or so sticking up because, like a flag, they signal the presence and location of the dormant plant. If your borders are densely interplanted with winter and spring performers like snowdrops, primroses and the best wood anemones, leaving no stubble may be important.

Most, but not all, herbaceous border perennials are technically hemicryptophytes. That is, the perennating bud sits in a crown more or less at ground level. Be careful if you spread the contents of the compost bin over them. These buds expect wind, frost and rain. They don't always cope so well in the close humid conditions under mulch which bacteria, fungus and slugs so enjoy. I've killed the most robust and invasive perennial sunflowers by mulching in the winter. If you decide to leave those tags they somehow serve to not only signal where you should spread the mulch but also serve as a ring of staves to keep the mulch back. This doesn't allow for the blackbirds who root and scatter and slowly redistribute your carefully spread compost. These are the same birds that eat your cherries, line up to break into the pear store and sing solos in spring.

Some stems are so brittle that driving a spade sideways across their bases is enough. A few - notably *Molinia caerulea* have an abscission layer at their base like a falling deciduous leaf so they naturally fall over, usually pointing northeast on the 27th (or is it the 26th) of December. These simply need gathering up. Failing this you can try pulling or finally resort to cutting with secateurs.

Alstroemerias would rather you pulled because hollow cut stems allow water access to subsurface buds that would rather be drier. Don't forget to clean the secateurs - nothing is as gunky as old perennial stems.

Delaying the tidying up has some real benefits for the plants too. Even a thin covering of last year's debris will act like a blanket and trap heat radiated from the ground. And, the soil seems to benefit too, being much more workable where nothing has been tidied.