***The Chelsea Chop***

By Maureen O’Connell

It is mid-July, and we are about halfway through our gardens' flowering season. The weather in our Monocacy area in April and May was a veritable mixed bag. One day, you needed the heat on in the house, and the next day the air conditioning was necessary. Our rainfall was fairly close to normal, which was good for some developing plants. Hydrangeas, ferns, and hostas, thrived in these climatic conditions, but others, especially hybrid tea roses, suffered.

About early to mid-July, I survey all my plants to see which ones could use some minor or major pruning. Many plants are a lot stronger than most people think. A little tough love now can result in healthier plants, prolong or delay flowering, and produce stockier, more branched and more floriferous specimens. Left alone, they may grow taller, lankier, need staking, and set out smaller and fewer flowers. London, UK gardeners call this pruning the Chelsea Chop. It is so called because it is usually carried out at the end of May, coinciding with the immensely-popular and famed Royal Horticultural Society Chelsea Flower Show in London. Our area's climate is different from that of London; the bloom time of many of their flowering plants is earlier than ours, and as their winters are not as harsh as ours, their plants experience less winter damage from snow, ice, and bitter winds. My Chelsea Chop time is about now.

Which plants are candidates for pruning?

Through experimentation, I have found that the following respond well to selective pruning: coneflower (*Echinacea purpurea*) sneezeweed (*Helenium*) Shasta daisy (*Leucanthemum*) Phlox paniculata, salvia, verbascum, true geranium (Cranesbill) coreopsis, *Nepeta*, monarda, rudbeckia, Sedum 'Autumn Joy,' and lavender. These are all perennials, but most annuals, especially petunias, do better with regular deadheading and pruning.

How to prune?

There are several methods, depending upon the plant species and the purpose of the pruning. Deadheading, cutting off just the spent flower, is good for all flowering plants. It encourages new growth, and it keeps the garden looking tidier. That is one of my pet peeves about the Knockout Roses: unless you regularly deadhead them, they can look quite messy. Some perennial plants flower in cycles. After the first flowering, remove the flowering stalk. This will promote more side branching and new flowers. They might not be as strong as the first growth, but it will extend significantly the season. It will also stop self-seeding. Phlox 'David' responds very well to this method. Sedum 'Autumn Joy' is a beautiful plant and a welcome addition to the autumn short-on-flowers season, but if left to its own growth habit, it can become very tall and lanky, and will fall over all of its neighbors. Cut the top growth back now to slow its growth. Some perennials, such as foxgloves, delphiniums, and verbascum, can be quite temperamental, especially in our climate. They are basically cool weather plants, but sometimes if I cut them back to the ground now, they might rebloom in September or October.

Another reason to prune at this time of the year is to remove diseased or dead branches. As my regular readers know, I love roses—I have over sixty bushes—but it is getting harder to maintain them. Years ago, I sprayed them all about once a week with systemic insecticides and fungicides. Many of them, especially the delicate hybrid teas, still got blackspot and powdery mildew and were eaten by Japanese beetles, but I felt that I was making a difference with my spray program. Over the past couple of years, more attention has been being paid to the dangers of pesticides to the environment. I started to notice the number of dead bees on my roses after I sprayed, and I couldn't do it anymore. At first, I tried different organic, safe-for-the-environment, nontoxic-to-bees sprays. Even if you carefully read the fine print at the end of the attached label entitled Environmental Hazard, it was all too confusing and deceptive. Walk into any Lowe's, Home Depot, or garden center, and you will probably see a product called Bayer 2-1 Systemic Rose and Flower Care, a broad spectrum pesticide to solve your garden's pest problems. I used to use it; it is probably one of the most toxic pesticides you can use in your garden. Look closely at the ingredients label; its active pesticide is imidacloprid, a neonicotinoid. Great news for your flower gardens; bad news for the bees. Neonicotinoids are one of the main suspects in the spreading bee decline, Colony Collapse Disorder.

So this year, my roses are not as glorious as they used to be. Some of their leaves are holey, and they have a bit of blackspot. Last week, I cut back all the bad areas; some will bounce back, but others will be a shadow of their mid-June glory days.

Our future gardens?

We will all have to adjust our gardening and agricultural practices to try our best to protect the environment. I know what the responses will be of the Climate Change Naysayers, but I, after more than forty years of gardening, can see the change. There are small things that home gardeners can do: select native plants that suit our area, plant flowers that are more drought, disease, and pest resistant. This will reduce your dependence upon chemicals. While they may have increased productivity in agriculture in general, I question what we are doing to our environment.