

KINGMAN IS GROWING! Column

A COUPLE OF SPRING TASKS

by *Charlee Ware*, Kingman Area Master Gardener

Whether it is a snip snip here or a pluck pluck there, it is a greedy act on my part. Why? Because, the simple task of deadheading spring and summer flowers will provide me with additional waves of colorful flowers. Likewise, the thinning of tiny fruit on our apricot, peach, plum and apple trees will provide us with larger, juicier fruit.

Why to Deadhead:

Dead-heading flowers seems tidy, so there is no conflict in why a person would or would not snip off a fading blossom; and certainly not in which fading blossom to snip off. When we snip off flowers, we delay the plants purpose in life – to reproduce by making seed. By removing flowers before seeds mature, we have delayed the plant's ability to make seeds or produce fruit. Therefore, most plants will use their energy to flower again and again.

How to Deadhead:

The best way to deadhead a faded flower is to cut (with sharp scissors or pruners) below the base of the entire flower structure including the seed-forming ovary. Don't just pull off the flower, as this ovary may remain. Some flower stems are long, and can be cut back to their juncture with the main stem. Try not to injure new flower buds.

As the spring progresses into summer, some plants can get leggy. To help compact the plant, prune a few long branches back to a lower juncture. Others, such as petunias will respond well to a shearing of flowers and stems when it gets too sprawling.

What plants to Deadhead:

Deadheading works well on most annual bedding plants. Remember their purpose in life is to reproduce, and these annuals only have one season. So, when you snip off their seeds, they keep trying.

Flowers that react well to deadheading include those often cut for bouquets such as roses, cosmos, dahlias, and zinnias. When you are cutting roses, always trim them back to a five-leaf leaflet, to encourage the formation of new flowering shoots.

Shrubs which respond well to deadheading include Buddleia (Butterfly bush), Syringa (Lilac) and some Spireas.

Many perennials and native plants will also be stimulated to bloom for longer periods by deadheading. These include; lavender, guara, California daisy, Angelita daisy, our wonderful desert marigolds and globe mallows, chocolate flower, coreopsis, and purple aster.

Go ahead and remove those faded flowers. Odds are it will encourage more blooms. If not, your flowerbed will be tidy.

Why Thin Fruit:

It isn't difficult for us to remove dying flowers. It is difficult to learn to be ruthless in thinning newly set on fruit—after all, each one still has potential. While fruits on trees that are not thinned are edible, they will be much smaller. After two or three years of small size fruit, you will gradually increase the amounts of immature fruits you remove, until you gain the appreciation of being ruthless. The farmer, who sells the apples to your favorite grocer, had to gain that appreciation or you would not be buying super-sized apples.

In most years, fruit trees set many times more fruit than they can support adequately. They have the same need to produce seeds as the flowers. Their seeds just end up in fruit we humans find delicious, so our gut reaction is the more pieces of fruit the better.

Your goal will be thinning stone and pome fruits to increase their leaf-to-fruit ratio. For apples and peaches, you will want 40 to 75 leaves per piece of fruit. Count the approximate number of leaves on one branch, and guesstimate the remainder.

Cherries, figs, persimmons, pomegranates, citrus, and nut trees do not usually require thinning, unless there is a danger in tree limb breakage. Neither are European plums thinned.

When to Thin:

The earlier that fruit are thinned and the leaf-to-fruit ratio is increased, the less effort the tree has to put into that thinned fruit. Thus, the larger the fruit will be at harvest and the greater the effect on next year's bloom.

Stone fruits (peaches, apricots, nectarines, and plums) should be thinned when they are about 3/4- to 1-inch in diameter. Thinning too early can result in split pits.

Apples and pears should be thinned at 1/2- to 1-inch, or within 30-45 days after full bloom.

How Much Fruit to Thin:

For home garden orchards, the amounts to thin are dependant on first the over all crop, and second, the number of fruit on a branch. If the crop is heavy all over, you will need to thin more drastically, than if the overall crop is light and one or two branches are heavy.

Thin peaches and nectarines to about 4-to 5-inches apart. Because of their smaller size, apricots and plums can be thinned to 3-to 4-inches.

Apples and pears produce a cluster of flowers and fruit from each bud. Retain the largest center (king) fruit whenever possible, and remove the others from the cluster. If your overall crop is heavy, thin to 6- to 8-inches apart. On a very long branch, thin heavily especially on the terminal end.

It is best to remove two fruit fused together, as well as other disfigured or damaged fruit.

One Last Thing:

Remember to clean up under the fruit trees. Don't throw the fruit on the ground, because it could encourage fruit tree insect pests. Do incorporate the waste into your compost bin.

If you are interested in PONDS, Kingman Area Master Gardeners will be holding a “GARDEN POND” workshop on Saturday, May 31, 2008 at 9:00 to 11:00 AM in Kingman. For more information telephone the University of Arizona Mohave County Cooperative Extension at 928-753-3788 or visit at 101 E. Beale Street, Suite A, Kingman.

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