

Time for a Haircut?

Showy goldenrod and New England aster show off at Shaw Nature Reserve (SNR). They, however, are taking up a little more pathway space than necessary. Would a spring haircut solve that problem? Scott Woodbury, SNR director of horticulture, shares his tip for keeping plants off the straight and narrow.



May and early June are excellent times to trim back tall perennials that tend to flop while in flower during summer and autumn. New England aster, rose turtlehead, false sunflower, showy goldenrod, sneezeweed, wild bergamot, Joe-pye weed, and native grasses come to mind. Un-trimmed, they can grow too tall for a small garden area and often lean over a path, patio, or driveway. In nature they tend to grow smaller and get support from neighboring plants, however in better garden soil that gets a sprinkle of water from time to time, they can get out of hand.

Here is what we do in the Whitmire Wildflower Garden. In May or early June stems are cut back by 40-60% in height. By May tall stems may reach 2-3 feet so we simply cut 1-2 feet off the top, especially at the edges of patios, paths, or the edge of a prairie garden. This prevents flopping and the need for fencing or supports. Summer blooming plants may bloom slightly later than normal but fall bloomers tend to bloom on schedule but at about half the normal height. If your garden space is limited, or if you simply want to reduce flopping or the flowering height on native perennials and grasses, this method really works.

Scott Woodbury