

THE CHELSEA CHOP

Don Witton

I'm sure we've all heard of the Chelsea Chop. This is the practice of cutting back the stems of certain perennials around the third week in May, when the Chelsea Flower Show is held (although it can be done up to the middle of June). The Chelsea Chop ensures that plants don't grow too tall and flop over in the summer, necessitating extra staking to keep them upright. I first learned this about 20 years ago when our then National Chairman, Jane Sterndale-Bennett, gave the South Pennine Group a talk and explained it.

However, I've never done the Chelsea Chop because it coincides with my visitor season for the National Collection of Euphorbias, and I didn't want to spoil the look of the garden whilst people were visiting.

Anyway, this year I decided to have a go, and the visitors never noticed any difference (or never told me). By the end of June the plants had grown new side-shoots and were shorter, bushier specimens. Of course, the upper part of 'chopped' stems can be used as cutting material.

Top of the list for fast-rooting cuttings are hardy chrysanthemums. I've really got into these plants since I visited Andrew Ward's National Collection on one of his October open days. I purchased six varieties in a range of colours and they have all produced excellent plants that will flower in October and November. Second comes sedums, which root very easily, either just in jars of water or straight into potting compost. If sedums don't get the Chelsea Chop, I find them one of the worst plants for flopping, and by September they have a 'cartwheel' look to them (stems flat on the ground, radiating out in a full circle).

Other genera which are suitable for the Chelsea Chop are: *Artemisia*, *Veronica*, *Veronicastrum*, *Asters* (including *Symphotrichum*), *Salvia*, *Monarda*, *Nepeta* and *Phlox paniculata* cultivars. Heleniums are suitable but cuttings are very slow to take. I never cover cuttings to maintain humidity, preferring to just keep them in the shade with the rooting compost well hydrated with regular watering.

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