



## Flowers That Die Well

by Marilyn Loser

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The main blooming season in my garden has passed. Under the weird skies (due to wild fires west of us), I contemplate what to do next. There are many perennials that need tending to – but what to do? Should I cut them back – and to where? Leave the seed heads to adorn the fall/winter garden?

Scott and Lauren Ogden in their book “Plant-driven Design” list a number of plants that “die well”. These are plants that look good when the blooms are done. They say, “This extends their ornamental life, makes for a different textural mood in a planting, and allows the gardener to wait a while before cutting them back.”

My giant purple allium (*Allium*) bloomed early in the summer and its fluffy seed head still captures the attention of garden visitors. In general, however, I prefer to leave seed heads on plants that bloom later in the summer. Most of these are perennials and I wait until the third year of blooming to retain the seed heads. I figure the first few years I'd rather have the plants energy go to forming a good roots, leaves, and blooms rather than seeds. Visit [AlamosaFlowers.net](http://AlamosaFlowers.net) for photos of the plants mentioned in this column.

Some of my favorites have an other worldly Martian look. These include purple globe thistle (*Echinops ritro*) with its prickly globe seed heads that retain a hint of purple all winter and sea lavender (*Limonium latifolium*) that is almost a smaller version of the larger thistle.

Each year a few hens and chicks (*Sempervivum tectorum*) succulents (known mostly for their rosette form and numerous offsets or “chicks”) send up a stalk with small flowers and plump leaves that dry into a wand-like structure. The seeding does mark the end of the plant's life. However, new chicks will probably fill in the space the next year.

Hops (*Humulus*) seed heads look like spruce cones and are often very thick on the vines that climb over trellises and fences. Low, ornamental buckwheat (*Eriogonum*) seeds pop open leaving a dried seed pod that looks like an open flower.

Astilbe (*Astilbe*) has spear-like seed head that looks nice throughout the winter. Apparently, these plants only bloom once a season, so deadheading them doesn't encourage a second blooming.

Quite a few plants have what I call airy, fairy seed heads. They seem to float in the air once leaves have dropped from plants. These include wild, white clematis (*Clematis virginiana?*) vine that has a wispy white head. It looks a bit like a dandelion seed head, but remains intact for most of the winter. Prairie Smoke (*Geum triflorum*) and Apache Plume (*Fallugia paradoxa*) seed heads are also wispy but have a pink color.

Baby's breath (*Gypsophila paniculata*) and sea holly (*Eryngium*) have small flowers that produce many tiny dried seed pods that add a lacy texture to the winter garden.

Of course, there are flowers that don't die well. I don't like leaving hollyhock (*Alcea rosea*) stalks as they tend to fall over and sprawl all over other plants. Columbines (*Aquilegia species*) and Maltese cross (*Lychnis chalconica*) just look messy. While I don't mind the occasional Shirley poppy (*Papaver rhoeas*) or peony poppy (*Poppy paeoniflorum*) seed pod, in groups they just look like a bunch of dried twigs and often screen other plants, like asters (*Aster*), that bloom in the fall.

*“Our highest assurance of the goodness of Providence seems to me to rest in the flowers. All other things, our powers, our desires, our food, are all really necessary for our existence in the first instance. But this rose is an extra. Its smell and its color are an embellishment of life, not a condition of it. It is only goodness which gives extras, and so I say again that we have much to hope from the flowers.”* Arthur Conan Doyle in “The Naval Treaty”