



# Life after death

'That nasty human being has cut off my babies. I must produce some more'

**P**LANTS come into this world with the instinct to procreate. That is why they flower in order to produce seed once they have been pollinated. That is why us gardeners dead-head flowers once they have faded because it forces plants to produce further flowers in order to produce further seed. If plants could talk they would say to themselves "That nasty human being has cut off my babies. I must produce some more." Please remain assured that there is no proof that dead-heading a plant harms them in any way although they do benefit from a generous liquid feed to help them with the extra effort they have to make to produce more flowers. This is particularly relevant to many early-flowering herbaceous perennials, and most roses. The life span of lupins, a famously short-lived perennial, can be lengthened if they are religiously dead-headed so that they do not have to make the effort to produce seed and become stronger plants as a result. Two plants in particular, hardy geraniums and Lady's Mantle, will love you all the more if you cut them right back down to the ground as their flowers fade, and they will bounce back with fresh foliage and a possible further show of flowers for late summer.

My youngest daughter Rosie who is training to become a plumber has started to garden for the first time in her life for the simple reason that she is running a household for the first time in her life. So it's down with the spanner and up with the trowel. She has a shaded courtyard, typical of a rented town flat, that consists of nothing but concrete, so she has started to collect shade-loving plants, all grown in pots. These include Heuchera, Hosta, Pulmonaria, Alchemilla and some ferns. She chose all the plants herself, and I hasten to add that they are all flourishing. It is indeed a comforting thought that horticulture is in her genes.

Text books can make the subject of pruning Clematis complicated. Actually, it is the easiest thing in the world. You give a trim, after they have flowered, to all species of clematis that have finished flowering by the end of June. The choice is yours as they do not always necessarily need cutting back, in the case of young plants for example. This treatment applies to the late spring/early summer-flowering, rampant montana species that can be trained to



Geranium.

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smooth walls and fences and even climb trees, the large flowering named varieties (one of the most famous being 'Nelly Moser') that flower in early summer, and the lovely alpine whose beautiful blue flowers appear in spring/early summer. All the later summer-flowering species like texensis and viticella (and the hedgerow species tangutica) can all be cut right back to ground level in late October, or in February if you live in a cold area. It's as easy as that. Remember, if you are planting a clematis in your garden, always plant it deeper than



practically all other plants, so that there is about six inches of soil above the rootball. This will prevent clematis wilt from killing your plant as it does not go underground. Clematis wilt is a fungal infection that normally starts at the top of the plant after a period of humid weather and works its way downwards. All infected growth must be cut out the minute this disease is spotted. The 'safe' part of the plant below the ground will, with any luck, soon start to produce fresh shoots.

If the summer proves to be hot and dry, raise the blades on your mower which will result in it looking greener for longer. Also, you can leave the collecting box off the machine. The small clippings help to reduce root scorch. I can hear myself talking like a grumpy old man when I hear myself complain about the price of plants these days, and so it is in our interests to propagate as many plants as we can from existing ones. July is a good time to take cuttings of conifers and many hardy shrubs. Now is the time to plant colchicums ('autumn crocuses'). They do best in a sunny, sheltered spot and can look most effective if planted around the base of a tree. You are not alone if you lost your bay in the cold winter. After all, it does hail from the Mediterranean. By all means buy another, but do not plant it out until next spring, the best time to plant most evergreens, and keep it in the greenhouse safe and sound this winter. ■