

GARDEN NEWS

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STAKING IN SPEEDING SPRINGTIME

Structures made from hazel supporting peonies

© Barbara Neumann

This is the time when every area of the garden starts to require our attention: the perennials and ornamental grasses, which provided us with valuable winter interest, need to be cut down and divided, the roses and hydrangeas pruned and fed, the self-sowers in the borders thinned out, the wisteria treated with a solution to protect the swelling buds from hungry pigeons, seeds need to be sown in the nursery, the lawn requires its necessary spring repairs, and the glasshouse needs a lick of shade paint. The list goes on, and even with the best scheduling and managing, the onset of spring can feel a little bit rushed. In all the urgency, the important task of staking the perennials can be easily overlooked, as the summer-flowering plants have barely broken into growth. But believe me, it is one of the most important jobs that you can do in the spring as it creates the backbone of an ongoing summer display.

I know that many of us think of staking as a tedious chore, but it is better to get backache early in the season than heartache after a summer storm. Only a few people have a completely sheltered garden, and most of us have to contend with wind from all or any direction that will affect our plants and displays. The 'Chelsea chop' can be an effective and preventive solution against wind damage, although care is needed not to overdo it as you might end up with a very late flowering. Relying solely on self-supporting or dwarf cultivars isn't satisfying at all: it is far better to allow plants to reach their natural potential.

Pea-sticks are the most versatile and natural method for supporting multi-stemmed

perennials up to 1.7m, and the most pleasing to the eye. Pea-sticks are young twiggy branches of birch, hornbeam and hazel (I prefer the latter as they are flexible for longer), which are woven into intricate structures to contain tall asters, campanulas, monkshoods, sprawling geraniums, herbaceous clematis and peonies. To do this yourself, cut the thick end of the branches to a point and push them into the soil around the plant or plant group every 30cm. Bend the tops to form a frame roughly three-quarters of the height of the plant. Randomly weave the twigs together, making a rock-steady and airy structure. This is done in February and March and it's necessary to know the various heights of the perennials, either by keeping a note from the previous year or by researching the dimensions for newly acquired ones. It is my favourite technique; it's creative, effective and has the advantage of looking good whilst the borders are bare. The only drawback is that they become hopelessly brittle by the end of the year. It can be difficult to find pea-sticks, but a few specialist plant centres might stock them in February, or a local coppicer will probably be grateful to find an outlet for his 'waste'.

It is mesmerising how a day spent on working with hazel twigs and weaving supportive and beautiful frames can provide a calming respite from the seemingly endless to-do-list of spring. Despite the inevitable busyness of the season, we are reassured that we make it through with the help of talented and efficient gardeners and our committed volunteers. Our efforts of 'going that extra spring mile' are always rewarded by a blooming summer display for the enjoyment of everyone.

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