

A guide to staking

There is an art to good staking in the flower garden. Ideally, it's carried out before a plant calls for support and is neither visible, nor an interference with the plant's natural pose and movement.

In recent years, many plants have been bred to be more compact, avoiding the need for support (catering to the low-maintenance gardener), and occasionally these may make fine garden plants. However, a garden needs grace, movement and, importantly, height to become a thing of beauty – unless, of course, carpet bedding is your thing. Furthermore, it's simply too restrictive to concentrate on plants that require no help.

During summer, many plants might not initially appear to need support. But being subjects of a maritime climate, where gales are frequent, it's better to invest a few hours in staking, which will provide the garden with a much longer flowering season and will also leave it looking much tidier.

The good and the bad

There is good staking and there is bad staking. Good staking is well-disguised and proactive. Poor staking tends to be rushed and reactive – a gathering of a bedraggled mass of stems into an overly trussed-up and unnatural-looking bundle during or just after a howling storm.

Some plants, such as delphiniums, will fail in severe weather, no matter how good the staking is. Moreover, some plants that need support in your garden may need no help in a friend's garden, where the soil is poorer and they grow shorter. Good staking is an art; working with your plants to understand how they behave and what is necessary is essential.

What to stake with

At Malverleys, we divide staking into two camps: using a cane and string (or for very large plants, a chestnut pole); and supporting plants with pea sticks.

Use canes for plants with strong stems, such as phlox, some of the campanulas, delphiniums, etc. When using a cane, it's important to see where the weakness lies. Some plants have very strong stems but fail at ground level, such as hollyhocks and foxgloves. Plants such as these will need a short, strong cane no more than 50cm high to keep them upright. Other plants require taller canes and two tiers of string.

It's important to match your cane to the plant, ensuring it's strong enough to carry the plant's weight, but not so substantial to be overkill. It is worth mentioning that older canes are less harsh on the eye, and it helps to trim the thick end of the cane to a node to prevent it splitting when driving it into the ground. Do test the cane for any weaknesses before use.

Staking with a cane

The time to stake is normally just before the flower buds form. For plants, such as phlox, position the cane at the back of the plant, just kissing the foliage and carefully push or knock the cane into the ground with a wooden mallet. Make sure the cane is straight, deep enough so that it doesn't move when you pluck at it, and the thick end is in the ground. (It's not uncommon to see canes upside down – one explanation I've heard is they go in easier.) If the cane looks skew whiff, rotating it can sometimes rectify the angle, otherwise remove it and try again.

Once steadfast, cut the cane to height, just below where the flowers will be produced. Cut a length of five-ply twine (thin three-ply can dig in to soft stems), long enough to go twice around the plant's perimeter. Using a clove hitch knot, secure the middle of the length of twine to the cane a metre above ground. Rather than just encircling the stems with the string, tie in each of the outer stems of the clump. Starting with the stems nearest the cane, wrap the string around each stem, then



Above Use canes for plants with strong stems. **Right, from top** Use a mallet to knock canes into the ground; make a clove hitch knot; tie in stems; *Isatis tinctoria* (wood)

back under to lock it into place (see images, above). Work from one stem to the next until both ends meet at the front. Tie the ends together to finish, or, for added security, come back through the middle of the clump until you reach the cane.

When tying the stems in, be mindful not to disrupt the natural habit by pulling the twine too



Staking with pea sticks

Plants that lend themselves to pea sticks tend to have numerous, weaker stems and a somewhat rambling habit; hardy geraniums are a good example. Small, delicate bedding plants that need just a suggestion of support, such as dianthus, nigella or some of the poppies, also do best with pea sticks. For the latter, just use the twiggy tips of the pea sticks here and there between the plants to stop them swaying. Fold the twigs over to make a little thicket of interlinking branches through which the plants will grow and disguise their support.

For plants, such as geraniums, make a larger pea-stick skeleton around the plant, just smaller than its ultimate mass, just before flowering. The best twigs come from hazel, beech or hornbeam – avoid anything that might take root, such as willow. Twigs should be branching and fan-shaped. To make a frame 120cm tall, use 150cm to 170cm-long branches. Insert the thick ends in the ground around the geranium with each fan overlapping its neighbour until the plant is encircled. Then fold the tips of the twigs into the centre of the circle above the foliage and weave them into each other. Use smaller twigs to cover any holes around the base of the structure. You should have a consistent network of twigs, but not so thick as to shade the plant. The plant will quickly push through and engulf the twiggy skeleton.

Above Hazel prunings are a great source of pea sticks. Below, from top Hardy geraniums require a larger pea-stick skeleton; use pea sticks for the likes of campanulas



tightly; it should be just firm enough without moving the stems. If staking a drift of the same type of plant, overlap these circles of twine from one clump to the next to help make it stronger. Just before the plants flower, put a second tier of string further up the cane, just below the flowers in the same fashion as the lower one.