

Fall Garden Clean-up for Pollinators

In the fall, it used to be you cleaned up every last leaf in your yard and garden. Recently though, there has been re-thinking on how to put those gardens to bed and traditional fall clean up.

All those beautiful flowers that provided pollinators with food also help them and other beneficial insects by providing suitable shelter for nesting and overwintering. That means that many pollinators need dead leaves to overwinter and survive. According to the Xerces Society (<https://xerces.org/>), the availability of nesting and overwintering habitat is one of the most important factors influencing populations of insects. A little messier is better. The litter is critical habitat for various insects and other arthropods, like bumblebees that provide pollination services. It offers pupation sites for caterpillars of many moth species that birds rely on to feed their young. Detritivores, like millipedes that recycle plant debris, shelter beneath it for the winter, as do some spiders that contribute extensive pest control to our environments.

Leave a thin layer of leaves on your lawn, too much (a couple of inches or more) can smother the turf, but a thin layer actually benefits lawns. Along the edges of your lawn, and in the space beyond, the layer can be much thicker, providing benefits to all the other wildlife in the area. Decomposing leaves provides organic matter and nutrients to help lawns grow. If that isn't an option, spread leaves over vegetable or flower beds. They will help build soil and provide needed habitat. When spring comes, be sure you wait until late spring (5 or more days above 50 degrees) before you remove them. This will increase the chance of successful emergence by butterflies, queen bumble bees and other overwintering critters.

About 30% of bee species are cavity nesters which need hollow or pithy stems to nest and overwinter. That makes it really important not to cut perennial flower stems in fall. That would also be true for raspberry canes as well. Also, many birds and other wildlife feed on the seeds of plants. In spring, when we do cut them, it's recommended to leave about 12 to 15 inches. Resist that urge to be tidy if you want to support pollinators.

This simple non-action is more challenging for some than one would think, as the desire to tidy-up the yard before winter is strong. But leaving plant material is one of the simplest and easiest things that we can all do to promote biodiversity in our landscapes. Understanding the important environmental role of the spent plant material is the first step. So the next time you head out with pruners in hand, think about the life that depends upon those plants, and head back inside for another cup of cider. Next spring you can greet the garden with even more anticipation – for all of the life it holds.



Photo: [Betty Jo Taffe](#)



Photo: [Judith Saum](#)