



Garden Cleanup, Reconsidered

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Above: This attractive fall border features remnants of purple coneflower (*Echinacea purpurea*), 'Cloud Nine' switch grass (*Panicum virgatum*), *Persicaria polymorpha*, little bluestem (*Schizachyrium scoparium*), and daimyo oak (*Quercus dentata*).

Top right: An American goldfinch feeds on the seeds of purple coneflower.



What you do and, more importantly, do not do in your garden now can help winterize plants and preserve habitat for wildlife through the colder months.

BY KRIS WETHERBEE

UNLESS YOU live in a warm region where gardening continues pretty much year round, your garden needs a bit of pre-winter care to prepare for the coming months. Standard fall to-do lists usually include pulling up annuals and emptying out containers, cleaning up perennial and vegetable beds, and gathering fallen leaves. However, there are some things that are better left undone. While tidiness is generally a virtue, overzealous cleaning can result in not only a visually bleak and uninviting winter landscape, but also less of the natural food and shelter sources that wildlife need to survive the coldest months.

Taking a more relaxed approach to winterizing the garden has numerous benefits, such as preserving soil structure, improving plant health, and creating a more hospitable place for wildlife. It only takes minimal effort to yield maximum results. By making the following refinements to your end-of-the-season routine, you can turn your garden into a welcoming place for wildlife throughout winter without causing the neighbors to call the weed ordinance enforcement department.

CUT BACK ON CUTTING BACK

While winterizing chores should include clearing out garden debris, you needn't remove every last scrap, and as Tracy DiSabato-Aust writes in her book *The Well-Tended Perennial Garden*, "what a bore it would be to try." Instead, focus on removing any diseased or damaged vegetation, but leave other plant remains in place to provide protection against freezing temperatures. It may not seem like much, but this can make a big difference, especially for tender plants.

Resources

American Horticultural Society Encyclopedia of Gardening Techniques by David Ellis, Fiona Gilsonan, Rita Pelczar, Graham Rice, Contributing Editors. Mitchell Beazley/Octopus Books USA, New York, New York, 2019.

Bringing Nature Home: How You Can Sustain Wildlife with Native Plants (2nd edition) by Doug Tallamy. Timber Press, Portland, Oregon, 2009.

The Garden Primer by Barbara Damrosch. Workman Publishing, New York, New York, 2008.

The Green Garden: A New England Guide to Planning, Planting, and Maintaining the Eco-Friendly Habitat Garden by Ellen Sousa. Bunker Hill Publishing, Piermont, NH, 2011.

The Well-Tended Perennial Garden (revised and expanded edition) by Tracy DiSabato-Aust. Timber Press, Portland, Oregon, 2017.

“Marginally hardy perennials, such as ‘Mönch’ aster (*Aster xfrickartii* ‘Mönch’), tender ferns, or mums,” explains DiSabato-Aust, “benefit from leaving the old foliage on the plants to provide insulation for the crowns during cold weather.” She also notes that certain late spring-emerging plants, such as leadwort (*Ceratostigma plumbaginoides*) and scarlet hibiscus (*Hibiscus coccineus*), are better left as reminders that “something is growing there, ensuring that the soil isn’t disturbed or something else isn’t planted in its space while it’s taking its time awakening from the winter.”

Carole Brown, a conservation biologist and ecosystem garden designer in Philadelphia, also advocates leaving grasses and seed heads standing through winter. “Many butterflies and other insects spend the winter in these plant stalks. By removing them you are throwing away next year’s beneficial insects,” she says. If you must cut back your plants, Brown recommends using the cuttings as mulch on garden beds so that insects and other wildlife can complete their life cycle and emerge safely in the spring. When pruning, keep an eye out for obvious egg cases attached to stalks and branches.

Birds will also appreciate the cover provided by plants left standing, and they will use last season’s remaining garden materials



Leaving sedum seed heads in the garden provides food for birds and lends architectural interest.

to make nests in spring. Plus, the attractive seed-laden heads remaining on many flowering plants lure in seed-eating birds.

Ellen Sousa, a garden coach and author of *The Green Garden*, lives in a “cold, snowy valley of southern New England where we often don’t see the ground until well into March.” She says that “instead of doing the traditional fall scalping of perennial beds, we leave tall plants such as coneflowers, agastache, asters, and ornamental grasses standing right through winter. Their seeds feed overwintering birds such as juncos, chickadees, and song sparrows when snow has buried most other natural food sources.”

Bird-friendly seed heads include black-eyed Susans (*Rudbeckia* spp.), sedums, coneflowers (*Echinacea* spp.), and

cosmos. Many of these plants also lend architectural interest and texture to the winter landscape. For example, some sedums flaunt showy deep-red seed heads. Purple coneflower (*E. purpurea*) produces striking, cone-shaped seed heads that turn black as seeds mature. River oats (*Chasmanthium latifolium*) are dressed in seed heads that turn from green to a bronzy beige in the fall.

LEAVE IT TO THE LEAVES

When it comes to your garden, the leaves that deciduous trees drop in the autumn are a windfall in more ways than one. They form an insulating blanket that will keep the soil temperature more constant, improve soil structure, feed beneficial microorganisms, and protect plants from the

cold. So if you rake leaves off your lawn or other areas, be sure to spread them under shrubs, tuck away a few small piles in the back corners of your yard, or add them to the compost bin. Otherwise, leave them where they fall and they will naturally break down over time.

“Many butterfly larvae overwinter in these leaves, along with spiders and beneficial insects,” Brown explains. “Leaves also provide cover and shelter for frogs, toads, salamanders, and other wildlife.” Resident songbirds will benefit as they pick and scratch around in the leaves looking for insect eggs and caterpillars.

In some parts of the country, a leafy blanket is essential for protecting dormant plants against extreme temperatures. “Here in northern Colorado, winter temperatures can fluctuate as much as 70 degrees in one day, especially in February and March,” says Pat Hayward, a horticultural consultant based in Fort Collins. “With our dry climate and cold winters, leaving leaves actually helps protect us from these large temperature changes.”

There are a couple of exceptions to the practice of allowing leaves to stay where they fall. One is if you have large, flat



A praying mantis egg case clings to the stem of a goldenrod left standing in winter.

leaves from trees such as maples, oaks, and sycamores. These should be cleared from garden beds because they can form a mat that will smother small or delicate plants. You can still use these leaves as mulch—just put them through a shred-

der or run over them with a lawnmower before applying them to a bed. The second is if you live in a region where crown rot is a problem; you may need to remove leaves altogether from perennial beds because they will retain too much moisture.



In this frontyard pollinator garden, the dried stalks of various herbaceous perennials capture snow, which helps insulate their roots.

MORE WAYS TO SUPPORT WILDLIFE IN WINTER



- Include a diversity of vines, perennials, shrubs, and trees of different heights to provide a complete package of food, shelter, and nesting sites.
- In addition to berried shrubs and trees, include plenty of evergreens, such as juniper, pine, hemlock, and rhododendron.
- Add a few well-placed feeders and nest boxes for non-migrating birds.
- Build a small brush pile with tree and shrub trimmings in an out-of-the-way area of your yard. Top it off with a layer of evergreen branches for added protection in colder climates. Birds, small mammals, reptiles, and amphibians will appreciate this safe haven.

—K.W.



The boughs of discarded Christmas trees make an effective winter mulch for perennial beds.

MUCH ADO ABOUT MULCH

If you don't have deciduous trees in or near your yard to provide leaves, you can use other organic material such as grass clippings, bark chips, and compost to help insulate the roots of woody plants and perennials. In places that experience freezing temperatures, hold off on mulching until you have had a couple of hard freezes to help reduce pests and diseases.

The idea is not to "prevent the soil from freezing but to prevent it from alternately freezing and thawing," explains Barbara Damrosch, an organic market gardener in Harborside, Maine, and author of *The Garden Primer*. "Have you ever noticed how food becomes mushy if you repeatedly thaw and refreeze it? Something similar can happen to plant roots, and the freeze/thaw cycle can also break them and heave them out of the soil," adds Damrosch. This is particularly true for marginally hardy species in your region or recently planted ones that haven't had enough time to get a strong root system established.

In some regions, snow cover also helps protect plants from weather extremes. "We leave plants standing not only to supply a food source for birds, but also to allow tall stems to capture the blowing snow," says Sousa. "It's like a thermal coat for roots, slowing down plants that might emerge from dormancy during mid-winter thaws."

Damrosch likes to use evergreen boughs as a winter mulch in her garden because they "don't lie flat on the ground, but catch the snow beneath them and hold it there as a protective blanket." She waits until the ground is frozen to put them down, which means that "boughs from discarded Christmas trees, available at just about the right time in the season, are a great resource and are easy to remove in spring."

There's no harm in tidying up a bit and otherwise readying your garden for winter, but keep in mind that sometimes doing less pays bigger dividends in the long run. And if you want to encourage wildlife to visit, now is the time to set out the winter welcome mat.

Kris Wetherbee is a freelance writer based in Oakland, Oregon. This is an updated version of the article that was originally published in the November/December 2010 issue of The American Gardener.