

Leaving Leaves and Flower Stalks for Wildlife

By Mary Tebo Davis, Urban and Community Natural Resources Field Specialist

Why?

Research by the Cornell Lab of Ornithology show a drastic decline in our North American birds since 1970. “More than 1 in 4 birds have disappeared in the last 50 years (that is a loss of nearly 3 billion birds).”

Insects are in dire trouble too. According to Biological Conservation, “40% of all insect species have declined globally and one third of them are endangered”.

This loss of biodiversity affects us all. Scientist and author Dr. Doug Tallamy writes: “Biodiversity losses are a clear sign that our own life-support systems are failing. The ecosystems that support us are run by biodiversity... Chances are, you have never thought of your garden – indeed of all the space on your property – as a wildlife preserve... Like it or not, gardeners have become important players in the management of our nation’s wildlife. It is now within the power of individuals to do something that we all dream of doing: to make a difference. In this case the ‘difference’ will be to the future of biodiversity, to the native plants and animals of North America and the ecosystems that sustain them.”

How?

Starting right now, this fall, we can each do our part and make a difference one yard at a time. Doing so is much easier than a traditional fall clean up, because doing less is more! Even in a small yard you really can make a big difference for the wildlife that share it.

In the past fall clean up might have been thought of as an overwhelming chore, but by rethinking those strategies and working with nature you can save huge amounts of your own time and energy while at the same time saving birds, butterflies, bees, and bugs.

Putting Your Perennial Gardens and Landscapes to Bed

Leave perennials standing:

1. The seedheads of perennial plants provide food in the winter for seed-eating birds such as finches, chickadees, juncos, and sparrows, along with wildlife viewing for you and your family.



Fast Facts

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2. Leaving all stems and stalks standing gives the native bees shelter for hibernation through the winter.
3. In the spring, cut perennials back to about fifteen inches above the ground. This will give the native bees places to lay eggs and complete their life cycle. It will also help to give a more uniform look to the garden or landscape.
4. To give your gardens a neater look through the fall, winter, and early spring (before new growth takes over), cut an edge to define the boundaries of your landscape or garden bed from your lawn, patio, or walkway. A simple cut-in edge that has a slight curve creates an intentional boundary and looks attractive and graceful. Avoid installing plastic edging, bricks, or other materials to create a boundary. A clean simple edge and a neat foreground such as a mowed lawn draws the eye in to the tidiness of the line and foreground rather than what is behind it.

Leave the leaves in your perennial gardens or landscape:

Instead of thinking about leaves as a huge chore that needs to be removed, let's look at what an incredible free resource they are!

1. Left in place leaves function as mulch - protecting soil from drying out, temperature swings, and keeping weeds down. They compost right in place breaking down and enriching the soil. Even pine needles work great as a free mulch and contrary to the widely held belief, they will not acidify your soil.
2. The leaf layer also provides shelter and insulation for our pollinators who over-winter in the leaves. We need to keep leaves on site for butterflies, bees, beetles, bugs, and birds!
3. Understanding how you can use these your onsite resources saves you time and money, and when spring comes there is no need to buy bark mulch.

What if you have a thick layer of leaves on your lawn?

A thin layer of leaves can benefit your lawn, so you don't have to remove them *all*. Here's some ideas on what to do with those extra leaves:

1. Use extra leaves for extra protection around the base of broad leaf evergreens like rhododendron that are susceptible to drying out in the winter.
2. Cover any bare soil in your vegetable garden or anywhere else on site. Never leave soil uncovered as the direct wind, sun and rain will harm soil life and in one teaspoon of healthy soil there is more living organisms than people on Earth!
3. Leave leaves whole (not shredded). Whole leaves provide more cover, and shredding destroys those overwintering pollinator eggs, caterpillars, and chrysalis, along with the leaves.
4. Create a leaf pile that breaks down naturally or add them gradually to your compost pile over time.
5. Offer them to others who understand what a rich resource they are.

How to Create Habitat for Stem-nesting Bees



WINTER

Leave dead flower stalks in-tact over the winter.

SPRING

Cut back dead flower stalks leaving stem stubble of varying height, 8 to 24 inches, to provide nest cavities.



Female bees find cut or naturally-occurring open stems, start a nest, then lay an egg on the pollen balls. Larvae eat the pollen.



SUMMER

New growth of the perennial hides the stem stubble.



Bee larvae develop in cut dead stems during the growing season.



FALL



WINTER



Bees hibernate in stems during the winter.



SPRING

Cut back dead flower stalks. Old stem stubble will naturally decompose.



Adult bees emerge and start nests in newly cut dead stems or in naturally-occurring open stems.



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Photo Credits

1. *How to Create Habitat for Stem-Nesting Bees* - <https://www.pollinatorsnativeplants.com/plant-lists--posters.html>

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About the Author

Mary Tebo Davis is an Urban and Community Natural Resources Field Specialist for UNH Cooperative Extension. With degrees in environmental conservation, education, and permaculture certifications, she leads over 400 Natural Resources Stewards and NH Big Tree volunteers throughout the state. Mary also partners with NH communities to create ecologically-based landscapes and gardens. She has collaborated on many revitalization projects, especially in NH's largest city, Manchester, renovating vacant degraded spaces creating community gardens and ecological landscapes, establishing the first green roof on city hall, and bringing permaculture to inner city neighborhoods. Mary is a co-author of two books: *Integrated Landscaping: Following Nature's Lead* and *Landscaping at the Water's Edge* and served as an editor on *NH's Innovative Land Use Planning Techniques - A Handbook for Sustainable Development*.

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