

The Labor-Saving Magic of Not Tidying Up

By Janis Butler, Master Gardener Volunteer

Let's say you do all the right things to help those pollinators and other beneficial insects and spiders in your garden. You grow flowers with many different shapes and colors, including lots of natives, with blooms from early spring through late fall. You avoid pesticides. You keep lawn to a minimum. In October, you pat yourself on the back, tidy up for the coming winter and put your feet up until spring.

But wait! Back up to "tidy". Tidy for whom? Not for those leg-endowed garden friends you've been helping all summer long. Most insects and spiders stick around for the winter, either as eggs, larvae, pupae or adults, and they need a place to live safely. Too much tidying could destroy their winter homes, or worse.

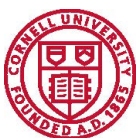
So, let's rethink some of those clean-up chores.

Cutting back perennials: No need to overdo it. The plants don't mind waiting until spring, and their stems provide winter homes for many tiny critters. Those empty-looking dried flowers can still contain seeds that birds hunt for all winter long. Especially leave coneflowers, sunflowers, black-eyed Susans and others from the aster family (those with wide, flat flowers). As a bonus, your garden will have greater winter interest as attractive dried flowers and seed pods stick out of the snow.

If you feel you must cut back those stalks, consider leaving some of them in small, loose piles around the back of the garden. Fat queen bumblebees would be glad to find a snug haven under such a heap. Stem-nesting mason bees may find them and be grateful. So will spiders, who badly need winter housing. In spring, they will send their progeny out to do battle with aphids, leafhoppers, leafminers, spider mites, spruce budworms, pine sawflies, thrips, cucumber beetles and many more gardeners' enemies.



Gorgeous seedheads of bee balm (*Monarda fistulosa*) and ironweed (*Vernonia noveboracensis*) in late November. Photo by Debbie Roos, NC Extension



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Mowing those grassy fields: Could you stand to mow only 1/4 or 1/3 of your meadow each year, leaving habitat for fauna? Katydid's drill tiny holes in the stems of goldenrods and asters and lay their eggs there. Butterflies attach their delicate chrysalids to dead sticks and stems in meadows, emerging as adults in the spring. The round galls on goldenrod stems are made by tephritid flies and are eaten by titmice and chickadees during the winter months. Ladybugs and lacewings nest in the dry, sheltered crowns of native grasses.



Monarch chrysalis on downy goldenrod (*Solidago puberula*) in mid-October. Photo by Debbie Roos, N.C. Extension.

Raking up leaf litter: This is a tough one. It goes against the grain of all our habits and assumptions. But think of it as free mulch. And remember who lives in that litter. Worms, snails, millipedes and earthworms feed on it, breaking it up so that other organisms (bacteria, fungi, protozoans, algae and viruses) can decompose it into forms of nitrogen, calcium, sulfur and other soluble chemicals and minerals that are recycled as food by plants, including trees. The little litter critters are themselves food for salamanders, turtles, other insects, birds and larger animals. Insect larvae in particular are eaten by forest birds. When you see a bird pecking through a pile of leaves, they're looking for food.

Many butterflies and moths overwinter in their pupal state in leaf litter. They're pretty but, more importantly, their caterpillars provide essential food for protein-hungry baby birds in the spring. Some moths and bees spend the winter hibernating under leaf litter. Many other critters huddle under the leaves in a semi-dormant state. The list of leaf-litter beneficiaries is long! Leaf litter insulates and provides moisture, the perfect winter habitat.



Luna moth cocoon secured to leaf litter. Photo D. George, B. Watkins N.C. Parks

A closer look at fungi: In addition to providing food for mites, springtails and many beetles and nematodes, the fungi in leaf litter plays a critically important role in breaking down lignin, the tough stuff that gives trees their strength. Without fungi to decompose the rigid cell walls of dead trees, our forests would be covered with millennia

of fallen trunks and branches. Mycorrhizal fungi live in close association with plant roots and

help them absorb vital nutrients such as phosphorus and nitrogen from the soil. (The fungi aren't doing this for free: from the plants they get nutrients produced by photosynthesis.)

By doing less tidying up, could you be harboring bad bugs as well as good? That's always a risk but one worth taking, considering the alarming rate at which natural habitat is shrinking for the more desirable critters, especially the natives. And of course, you should tidy up any litter that might contain pathogens. Get rid of dead leaves under the grape arbor and the leaf-spot-ridden cherry tree. In fact, clean up carefully the fallen leaves of any plant with leaf spot or any other signs of disease. Dispose of all disease-prone plant material (tomatoes, impatiens, peonies, roses) properly, meaning double-bag it and put it out with the trash unless you are positive it's healthy. If you have voles eating your plants – and they'll eat bark, crowns, seeds and fruits as well as roots – you may want to leave some cleared (tidied) space so that hawks can find them.

Keep in mind that the insect and spider lives you save this winter will benefit your flowers next summer and generally contribute to a healthier ecosystem.



The late November chubby seedheads of Maryland golden aster (*Chrysopsis mariana*) are as golden as the blooms! Photo by Debbie Roos, N.C. Extension.