

Six Reasons Not to Clean Up Your Garden This Fall

By Elizabeth Cornell Fake, Fairfax Master Gardener

Most every gardening book has a chapter on the Fall Garden Cleanup. It lists chores, presents timelines and gives detailed instructions on how to create the perfect garden graveyard. They advise to rake every leaf, cut every plant to the ground, apply a thick layer of mushroom mulch and tie those burlap bags tight. This well-meaning advice claims to jumpstart the new garden season and most importantly eliminate all the pests and fungal plant diseases from the last year that could come back to haunt you in the spring.



In her article, "Six Reasons Not to Clean Up Your Garden This Fall," Jessica Walliser, a degreed horticulturist and contributor to the SAVVY GARDENING website, writes, "Times have changed." Fall cleanup endangers wildlife habitat and destroys potential for plant propagation. We want to do as little as possible to disturb the natural balance a dormant winter season brings to our gardens. Her six reasons are briefly summarized below:

- **Native Bees:** Our 3,500 plus species of native bees need a safeguarded winter habitat to continue their role as important pollinators for our gardens. Let them overwinter in untouched underground burrows, in the stems of decayed plants or in uncut ornamental grasses.
- **Butterflies:** The serious decline in butterfly populations presents another good argument to avoid fall garden cleanup. Although Monarch butterflies migrate to the south for the winter, most other species stay at home and try to keep warm and dry in their own backyard. They need cozy retreats like leaf litter, tree bark and dead plant stems to survive in a chrysalis state.
- **Ladybugs:** As virulent pest predators, ladybugs earn a happy winter home by devouring a host of soft-bodied insects and eggs every day. To have a head start on a pest-free spring, leave piles of leaves to make a place for their winter hibernation.
- **Birds:** When our song birds arrive home from their winter migration, they serve us well by feasting on the caterpillars and other destructive insect pests they need to feed their young families. Less fall cleanup means more insects for them.
- **Predatory Insects:** These are the insects (assassin bugs, lacewings, big-eyed bugs, pirate bugs, damsel bugs, ground beetles, etc.) that spend the winter asleep as adults, eggs or pupae. When they wake up in the spring, they are ready to spring clean your garden of other more destructive insects. Leave them the protection of plenty of garden debris.
- **Beauty:** The disorder and distress of the winter garden is as beautiful as the summer garden in its own way. A single leaf on a tree silhouettes against the winter sky. An ice-covered ornamental grass shines in the sunlight. The plump, fallen leaf pile glitters with frost. The waning remnants of the spring, summer and fall are far more pleasing than a yard raked to the perfection of barren ground.

Walliser recommends leaving the garden cleanup until the first warm days of spring in late March and early April. Then, you can grab the rake, shovel or pruners and get busy.

Reference

Six Reasons Not to Clean Up Your Garden This Fall, Walliser, Jessica, SAVVY GARDENING