

Fall Cleanup: Let's Be a Little Bit Messier

Many gardeners are quite opinionated about when to clean their garden beds. Some argue that every leaf and all decayed plant matter must be removed in the fall. Others would say to leave well enough alone until spring. For those who wait until spring may have a good thing going.

Postponing the process until warmer weather may be better for the environment and beneficial insects that overwinter in leaf and plant litter. Many insects, cocoons (e.g., that of the swallowtail butterfly), and ground-dwelling bees overwinter or are protected by plant debris. Although some are so small that we might not notice them, they nonetheless are good for the environment. Many become food for returning birds and others break down decaying material adding to soil health.

By knowing which plants are susceptible to diseases, you may pick and choose areas to leave to nature. For example, many peonies and roses should have their debris removed in the fall to prevent mildew and other diseases. Likewise, vegetable gardens need to be cleaned up to avoid soil-borne pathogens from overwintering on diseased plant debris. Consider leaving seed heads on perennials like coneflowers or sunflowers, for example, for winter birds that depend upon them for food.

Leaving dense piles of tree leaves or other plant litter in the garden is not the best practice, but a light layer of mulched leaves applied in the fall will increase the soil health of lawns and landscape beds.

Next fall, consider how you want to approach your garden cleanup. By waiting till spring, you may improve the general health of flower beds, lawns, and benefit nature.

For more information: [Leaf Litter: Do the Benefits Outweigh the Work?](#)

by Les Harrison | Jan 22, 2015

<http://nwdistrict.ifas.ufl.edu/hort/2015/01/22/leaf-litter-do-the-benefits-outweigh-the-work/>

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