

# Preparing for Winter

By Virgene Link

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## Protect insects - don't clean up your fall garden

The time to prepare your garden for winter is quickly approaching. Before you do, however, you might want to consider the following questions.

**Q:** Is it necessary to protect insects over winter? Aren't they all going to die off anyway?

**A:** It's necessary to somewhat plan for protective places where insects or their pupae can overwinter. Only the workers and drones die off in the bee and wasp colonies. The queens who are carrying the eggs for the next year's hatch are wintering over. Lepidoptera (butterflies and moths) have eggs or pupae that are wintering over as do the flies. And of course the monarch butterfly migrates to over-wintering spots in Mexico.

Some insects overwinter in logs or holes in trees and some just bury themselves deeper in the soil. A few insects reduce the water content in their bodies and replace it with glycerol, which acts as an antifreeze.

Nymphs of dragonflies, stoneflies and mayflies live in fresh water ponds and streams over the winter, sometimes even under ice. They feed and grow and are therefore able to emerge in spring.

**Q:** I've heard that there are a lot of beneficial insects and can understand why we'd want to protect them. But what about the pests?

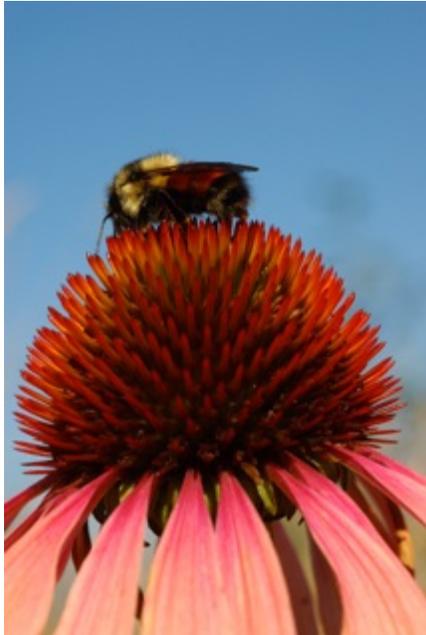
**A:** In actuality only about 1% of insects are true pests to humans, their crops or their animals. The other 99% are either beneficial, just interesting or of mixed consequence.

It is important for our beneficial insects to have food sources, so they remain in our gardens to do other important work like pollination. With that in mind, we need to learn to tolerate some damage, so the "good guys" have something to eat. We can take other steps to help manage the "bad guys" if there is an overload of damage.

**Q:** What have you recently done in your garden to help the "good guys"?

**A:** As I was pruning a laurel hedge a couple of weeks ago, I piled some leaves and branches to dry a bit (it was sunny then) before putting them in the yard waste container. A few days later, as I was loading them, I disturbed a plethora of shiny metallic ground beetles. These workers feed on many insects, larvae of insects and most important slug

and snail eggs. There is even one beetle that eats snails. So to give them a protected place, I took a fair sized pile of leaves and piled them beneath the hedge near some of the trunks. They will receive protection from wind, snow and rain there and have an insulating cover.



Echinacea, or purple coneflower, develops an interesting seedhead that will nourish birds, even as the snow falls. **Photo by Christine Farrow**

With this in mind I'd like to mention not to trim your ornamental grasses in the fall. The tight clumps afford protection for beetles, spiders and others, and the bent over blades also give an insulated place for more warmth and dryness. I've also had two clients at Plant Clinic find colonies of bumblebees in matted dried grass. One colony was below a compost container in some dried lawn clippings. The other was in a fair-sized clump in a weedy area that was dry. The queens will be wintering over, perhaps in a scooped out area within the roots or in an abandoned mouse hole.

It is good to leave a few non-perfect grassy areas or ferns with dying fronds that provide protection. This year's fronds can be trimmed in the spring as with the ornamental grasses. Piled brush or stems and leaves in a compost heap are also good hiding places.

**Q:** What else can you do during yard clean up?

**A:** You'll want to destroy any leaves from trees that have fungus on them, like scab on apple leaves or spots on photinia. Otherwise, rake leaves and spread them as mulch over your beds. Leave stems and leaves in your flower beds. Leaf litter layers provide habitat for beetles, spiders, infinitesimal wasps, woolly bear caterpillars and other important predators like pirate bugs.

**Q:** You've mentioned spiders a couple of times. I've noticed the big orb webs in my garden. What about them?

**A:** Spiders are the best predators in your garden and in your home. They patrol your attics, crawl spaces, inside your walls and, of course, on practically all plants in your garden looking for a meal. The females are attaching egg cases in various places so the eggs can hatch in the spring. Think of them also as protein snacks for birds and other wildlife in the spring.

Lots of people notice the giant European house spiders this time of year. The males are on the move, searching for their mates. They fall out of light fixtures and come in through

holes in the walls where piping comes through and end up in your kitchen or bathtub. Place a jar over them and slide a paper under it so you can move the spider to a protected spot near your foundation. They'll find a way back into that crawl space and maybe their sweethearts on the way. Please be sure to cut them some SLACK! They have a very important job to do.

Protecting the insects in your garden should be one of your main goals in preparing your garden for winter.

**Right** - Spiders are good guys but you may not want them inside the house. Don't kill them, just move them back outside, so they can continue eating.  
**Photo by Christine Farrow**



### Autumn in the garden

In this WSU Know & Grow Workshop, Skagit County Master Gardener Diane Wisen will discuss tasks – cleanup, planning, planting – you can do during the fall to care for your garden.

**What:** Fall Garden Tasks (a question-and-answer session is planned)  
**When:** 1 PM Tuesday, October 16  
**Where:** WSU Sakuma Auditorium, 16650 Highway 536, Mount Vernon  
**Information:** 360-428-4270, ext. 0 or <http://skagit.wsu.edu/MG>