

# Let it Be

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## Why not to clean up the fall garden



Transfer your leaves, whole, into your garden and let them decay naturally over the winter. Birds and insects will benefit, and the soil will be replenished with nutrients as the leaves break down. *Photo by Nancy Crowell / WSU Skagit County Extension Master Gardeners.*

Dutch garden designer Oudolf is best known in the United States for his design of the Highline garden in New York and the Lurie garden in Chicago, although he has done many other gardens around the world. One of the key features of Oudolf's designs is that they do not need to be cut down in winter as they remain visually interesting, at least to those who can accept a little messiness in a garden. In fact, he brazenly admits that he likes dead plants.

Oudolf has a point, and one worth considering. In nature, plants die in winter, but they are not cut down, removed or otherwise “tidied up.” They decay slowly and beautifully, replenishing the soil with nutrients, providing homes and sustenance for wildlife and insects. And if you allow yourself to look closely, you will begin to appreciate the beauty of a decaying plant.



Leave the leaves. Shredding leaves after raking to use them for mulch can harm the beneficial insects that attach themselves to the undersides during winter. *Photo by Nancy Crowell / WSU Skagit County Extension Master Gardeners.*

Many gardeners proudly turn their gardens into viable wildlife habitat during the growing season. There is a surging interest in gardening with native plants across the country to support our native pollinators. If you have spent time making your garden a safe haven for insects and wildlife, be the first person to refuse to tidy up that garden for winter. The insects and birds do not go away in winter and cleaning up your garden—deadheading, raking up leaves, cutting back plants—removes important nutrients for the very creatures you are spending your summers trying to attract. It is time to recognize that even when you are not out working in it, your garden is doing important work on behalf of the environment. If you have worked to create a wildlife habitat, understand that it needs to be a year-round habitat. Otherwise, you undo all the good work you have done during the growing season to support birds and beneficial insects.

Resist the urge to clean up your garden in the fall. Let the leaves lie. Let the spent flowers stay where they are. Resist the urge to cut back and tidy up. You will be amazed at the results if you start to practice this habit. The idea of cleaning up a garden for winter is ingrained in a lot of us.

It seems like the right thing to do. You have spent the summer weeding and pruning and getting things just right—and by the time fall rolls in, you figure your season is over and everything should be put away. It is simply not true. The Audubon and the Xerces societies both are now promoting minimal fall garden cleanup. It is time gardeners get on board.

Still a skeptic? Here are a few reasons:

#### Bees

We all know bees are endangered. The widespread use of pesticides has taken a toll on them, and they need our help to continue to survive and pollinate for us. Of the 20,000 bee species, some 70 percent of them nest underground. There are 3500 native bee species in the U.S. Those that nest underground emerge in spring to pollinate. Letting your leaves cover the garden over the winter provides an extra layer of insulation that ensures that the bees will be safe and warm throughout the winter months, ready to emerge again in spring and do their important work.

#### Other Beneficial Insects

Many insects make their winter homes in the remains of plants that grew over the summer. Cutting back or removing those plants just eliminates places for beneficial insects to hide. From lady beetles to butterflies, overwintering insects need safe places to spend the cold, dark months. Your garden is as good a place as any if you provide the right environment.

#### Birds

Birds will eat the seeds of spent plants—if they are left untouched. They also feed on insects (see above) that live in the dead plant material. Have you ever noticed birds foraging under leaf material? It is because they can find all sorts of insects and grubs just underneath the leaves. Many people like to rake up their leaves and shred them before reapplying them as mulch. If insects are nesting in the leaf litter, shredding the leaves will destroy them. Think of leaf litter as more than something to protect your plants—think of those leaves as potential homes for the beneficial insects, such as lacewings, that will emerge in the spring to help your garden.

#### Fertilizer

As plants break down over winter, their decomposing parts add nutrients back into your soil. Nutrient-rich soil is healthy and alive and translates to great growing material. This is one of the concepts behind no-till gardening, which is becoming more and more popular with vegetable gardeners. More and more people prefer to use fewer chemicals and create an environmentally-friendly garden space. Using the plants you have in place to do this is a great way to avoid commercial products while improving your garden nutrients.

#### Soil

The bio-matter left behind by dead plants and leaves eventually breaks down enough to turn back into soil. It just makes sense to let these materials stay in place and replenish your garden.

## Aesthetics

This is the tricky one. It is so tempting to remove everything dead and then tidy up all the corners of your garden bed so that you have a blank slate come spring. If you appreciate Nature, though, with patience and observation, you will come to recognize a too-tidy winter garden is devoid of life and interest. When you leave a garden to regenerate in a natural way, you may come to appreciate the interesting shapes of dead flower heads on a snowy day, the birds that flock to your garden on a late afternoon in fall to forage for grubs, and the soft silhouettes of dried seed heads against an early morning sky.



A certified wildlife habitat isn't seasonal. Letting the garden die back naturally and not cleaning it up over winter will help protect beneficial insects and keep your carefully nurtured habitat functioning for wildlife. *Photo by Nancy Crowell / WSU Skagit County Extension Master Gardeners.*

It may take some time for you to appreciate the unkempt look of a garden left alone. If you are not moved by the positive impact to the environment, there is definitely something else to consider: time. Learning to let your garden take care of itself for winter buys you time. Why create work for yourself that is, at least environmentally, not necessary? The time you would spend dead-heading, clearing, and mulching can be spent doing other things—like spending time with family or doing your favorite hobby, looking through seed catalogs and planning what you want to add to your garden next year instead. It will be time better spent.

Save the cleanup for the spring, after the insects have emerged.

## **RESOURCES:**

- <https://www.audubon.org/news/how-make-your-yard-bird-friendly-0>
- <https://www.xerces.org/blog/leave-the-leaves>
- <https://www.audubon.org/news/to-help-birds-winter-go-easy-fall-yard-work>
- <https://extension.oregonstate.edu/news/mulch-key-no-till-gardens>
- <https://www.ars.usda.gov/ARUserFiles/20902500/DavidHuggins/NoTill.pdf>
- <https://onslow.ces.ncsu.edu/2017/11/reasons-not-to-clean-up-your-garden-before-winter/>
- <https://www.monarchgard.com/thedeepmiddle/why-you-shouldnt-clean-up-the-fall-garden>
- [https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/home/does-your-garden-need-a-fall-cleanup-not-so-fast/2016/10/11/2d7833ea-8b46-11e6-bff0-d53f592f176e\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/home/does-your-garden-need-a-fall-cleanup-not-so-fast/2016/10/11/2d7833ea-8b46-11e6-bff0-d53f592f176e_story.html)
- <https://savvygardening.com/6-reasons-not-to-clean-up-your-garden-this-fall/#:~:text=Not%20cleaning%20up%20the%20garden,and%20out%20of%20leaf%20litter.>
- <https://entomology.cals.cornell.edu/extension/wild-pollinators/native-bees-your-backyard/#:~:text=Not%20all%20bees%20live%20in,become%20active%20in%20early%20spring.>