



To Clean or Not to Clean? Some Pros and Cons of Fall Garden Cleanup

By Nick Goltz, DPM

Assistant Extension Educator and Director of the UConn Plant Diagnostic Laboratory

UConn Home & Garden Education Center

As the weather gets colder and our favorite plants start to die back, you may be wondering whether you should clean up the fallen leaves and dead plant material in your garden or leave it be for pollinators to use for shelter over the winter. Bees, butterflies, and other beneficial critters use the dead plant material as refuge, so many people choose to leave their garden untouched until early spring – the dead plant material can be removed just before new growth to allow maximum benefit to pollinators.

Leaving dead plant material in the garden through the winter is not without its risks, however. Those piles of dead leaves and twigs can be a refuge for more than just pollinators, after all. Pest insects, rodents, and fungal pathogens that cause plant disease will survive the winter in this plant material as well, allowing them to cause trouble in the garden once the weather warms. Additionally, fallen leaves and plant material left untouched can be problematic for lawns as they obstruct light and become compacted over the winter, making the lawn muddy and patchy come spring.

With all this in mind, how can one determine whether to clean the garden in fall or spring?

First, consider location of your garden and the history of the plants grown within it. Patio gardens, potted plants, and plants grown along the sides of buildings are usually not good options for allowing the dead plant material to remain through the winter. While pollinators may take advantage of these spaces, it is more likely that rodents and other critters looking to take advantage of the warmth and food that human homes provide will take up residence here instead.

Similarly, plants with a history of pest or disease issues are poor candidates to serve as winter homes for pollinators. As a plant pathologist, one of the first recommendations I give my clients navigating a plant disease issue is to practice good sanitation by cleaning up and discarding all diseased plant material in the trash. Pests survive the winter in the same way that beneficial pollinators do and some plant pathogens can survive for upwards of ten years in old plant material and soil. I usually don't recommend composting diseased plant material as the compost would need to be turned frequently and sustained at a high temperature of approximately 140-160 degrees F to give the best likelihood of killing pathogens, and even then, there is little guarantee that all affected material will be treated equally. To minimize risk of reintroducing disease to your garden, it is best to throw diseased plant material away, burn it following local burn ordinances, or bury it deeply in a location not used for gardening.



Unmanaged or lightly managed wooded areas behind homes are an ideal choice to leave untouched through the winter to serve as pollinator refuge sites. Photo by Dr. Nick Goltz

Instead, choose healthy plants located away from the home to leave be as a refuge for pollinators and other beneficials. Unmanaged or lightly managed wooded areas behind homes are an ideal choice. If you have wildflowers in your garden like *Rudbeckia* that you'd like to allow to self-sow, these are good choices to leave and tidy up in the spring as well. Pollinators looking for shelter will not care if a plant was healthy before winter or near a home before moving in.

If you're someone looking to prioritize pollinator health in your garden, beyond temporary refuge sites, it can be helpful to think of long-term solutions and opportunities for pollinator health and protection. Avoid spraying insecticides, if at all possible, especially near flowers. Even organic products labeled for use against ticks and mosquitos can kill pollinators exposed to them. Consider installing a bee house for solitary native pollinators or simply plant more native flowers with high nectar production, such as *Asclepias* species in the spring!

If you have questions about fall garden chores or any other gardening question, call the UConn Home and Garden Education Center, toll-free, at (877) 486-4274 or visit us at www.homegarden.cahnr.uconn.edu or your local Cooperative Extension Center.