

## Leave the Leaves This Fall

By Elizabeth Craig



To protect over-wintering pollinators and your plants, skip the fall clean-up this year. Wait until it has warmed up in the spring and do a gentle spring cleanup instead. The rule of thumb is to wait until temperatures are consistently about 50 F (10 C) – that’s around late March or early April in the NYC area. Don’t be fooled by an unusually warm day or two before that time. By removing leaves and other plant material too early, you risk destroying many of your pollinators.

Leaf litter is an essential component of a pollinator garden. The local butterflies you want to see in your garden next spring may be spending the winter in your leaf litter. When you clean up, rake, blow or chop leaves and perennials you may be destroying butterfly and moth chrysalises. Overwintering Luna moths and swallowtail butterflies have chrysalises that are camouflaged, mimicking dried leaves, and blend right in with the leaves.

Leaf litter creates an insulating layer that regulates temperature and moisture levels, keeping the ground warmer and protecting both insects and plants from the damage caused by winter freeze and thaw cycles. Mated queen bumble bees may burrow only an inch or two into the earth to hibernate for winter. An extra thick layer of leaves is welcome protection from the elements.

A wealth of life lives in the leaves: beneficial microbes, worms, spiders, snails, beetles, millipedes, and mites. These ‘grubs’ provide essential food for our favorite garden friends a step up on the food chain – the birds, mammals, amphibians and turtles.

A rich source of organic matter, leaves are garden gold. Trees roots pull up minerals from deep in the subsoil and bring them to the surface. Trees concentrate these minerals in their leaves and wood, making leaves a rich source of calcium, magnesium, phosphorus, potassium, and valuable trace minerals. When the leaves fall, these elements become available to plants and animals in the area. Leaves can replace vital nutrients that may have leached out of upper soil levels.



The Luna Moth chrysalis looks like dried leaves



Night-flying Luna moths are active March through September

Use your leaf litter as mulch year round. It blocks light and suppresses weed growth, holds moisture and protects plants during dry periods. Leaf litter helps your site hold more water. By slowing water movement and raising infiltration rates, it can reduce stormwater runoff. But make sure you keep excess leaves out of wetlands and away from roadways where they can block storm drains.

You can also use leaves to expand your garden into unused areas of lawn and improve habitat. Leave the leaves where they fall, or gently place leaves under the drip line of trees and blanket your flowerbeds.

A great area to reclaim lawn can be found under trees. Trees and lawns really do not mix and are rarely happy growing together. Better to use a ground cover under your trees. Mowing under the tree drip line will damage roots. When tree roots are repeatedly nicked or cut by mowers, harmful bacteria and fungus can enter the tree. This can shorten its lifespan. Violets and sedges are easy ground covers and may establish naturally if you stop mowing in an area. Wild violets are host plants to fritillary butterflies. (See the ground cover article in this issue for more suggestions.)

A little worried about curb appeal? Signal intent with edging, mass plantings, a grassy swale, an inviting path and a pollinator pathway sign. Your pollinator garden is actually not a big mess; it is a garden moving towards a higher level of order.

You can add another season of beauty to your property this winter by leaving grasses and perennials with seed heads standing up until spring. Mason bees may be trying to over-winter in your perennial stalks. And it will give you the opportunity to enjoy watching songbirds bounce on old seed heads. Frost-edged leaves on the ground and snow-and-ice-coated perennials and native grasses catching the winter sun make winter in the pollinator garden a season of great beauty.

So, plan some other outdoor activities this fall and leave the clean-up for spring. Take a break, forget the rake. Take a hike, ride your bike. But if you really want to work in the garden, do some invasive plant removal. Invasives are easier to see in the fall as they stand out with more persistent leaves.

And fall is a great time for planting more natives! A few native bird and pollinator favorites with winter interest are winterberry and American holly, crabapples, red twig dogwood, chokeberry, viburnums, native honeysuckle (*Lonicera sempervirens*) and evergreens. See [Audubon's plants for birds](#) – they're the same plants pollinators need!