

Nature in the Neighborhood – October 2021

Leave the Leaves this Fall

To me, Autumn always comes as a bit of a trick, something I wasn't expecting so soon -- though I know for others, it's a treat. But arriving it is, and the sounds of Fall will be replacing those of Spring and Summer: the buzz of katydids and crickets at night, the honking geese heading south, the rustling of leaves under foot, and -- unfortunately -- the now almost constant drone of leaf blowers.

But there's a movement to skip both the blowing and raking of leaves in the Fall. MassAudubon recommends putting off the Autumnal cleanup altogether noting that doing so is "one of the most valuable things you can do to protect and help native pollinators thrive." Why? It's because our native pollinators, which includes bees, moths, and butterflies, rely on leaf litter for both food and shelter during the Winter months. While Monarch Butterflies migrate south to Mexico (as mentioned in a previous Nature in the Neighborhood), the majority of butterflies and moths overwinter in the landscape as eggs, caterpillars, or chrysalises.



And it's not just pollinators that benefit. Leaf litter is also a haven for birds, turtles, toads, and other wildlife, serving as nesting and hiding places, and a food source.

Added to this is the fact that Fallen leaves form a natural mulch and fertilize the soil as they break down. In short, it's good for wildlife and good for your garden.

In its blog, MassAudubon provides the following tips to make your Fall garden cleanup both easier on you as well as more pollinator-friendly:

- “Leave the leaves! When you bag and throw them away, you're probably tossing out precious pollinator larvae and eggs too.
- Pile leaves around the base of trees, shrubs, and perennial plants to protect their roots and provide shelter for pollinators.

- Put off trimming back dead stalks from ornamental grasses and flowers until spring ... and
- Save some leaves in a pile and add them gradually to your backyard compost bin to supplement your “green” food waste with “brown” matter.”

See: blogs.massaudubon.org/yourgreatoutdoors/leave-the-leaves/

If leaving leaves on your lawn is too messy for you, and having a perfect lawn is a priority, the leaves can be raked off the lawn and into flower and shrub beds. Then, if you need to do a cleanup in the Spring, it’s best to wait until late in the season so as not to destroy all the life you’ve protected over the Winter. The Xerces Society provides some on-line guidance on when to tackle garden clean up in the Spring: xerces.org/blog/dont-spring-into-garden-cleanup-too-soon.

National Wildlife Federation Naturalist David Mizejewski points to one more reason to leave the leaves: “The less time you spend raking leaves,” Mizejewski says, “the more time you’ll have to enjoy the gorgeous fall weather and the wildlife that visits your garden.” *See:* nwf.org/Magazines/National-Wildlife/2015/OctNov/Gardening/Leave-the-Leaves

A Word on Gas-Powered leaf blowers

Use of gas-powered leaf blowers is an increasingly common method of garden maintenance year-round but especially in the Fall. In addition to being annoyingly noisy and extremely polluting, they are actually harmful to your garden. They blow away and erode topsoil, resulting in damage to plants’ roots, and compact soil making it hard for air and water to permeate down into the ground.

As Audubon points out, “blowers can be more than a nuisance. Some produce more than 100 decibels of low-frequency, wall-penetrating sound—or as much noise as a plane taking off—at levels that can cause tinnitus and hearing loss with long exposure. Beyond that, gas-powered lawn care of all kinds spews pollutants linked to cancers, heart disease, and asthma.” *See:* audubon.org/magazine/spring-2021/why-cities-are-taking-action-limit-loud-and

And they present a particular problem for landscape crews who spend the day breathing the airborne particulates the leaf blowers emit which may contain

dust, mold, pollen, chemicals from herbicides and pesticides. Not to mention, that the emissions from gas powered engines, such as carbon monoxide and non-methane hydrocarbon, contribute to air pollution and global warming. This has led California just this month to ban the sale of new gas-powered lawn mowers, leaf blowers, chain saws, and other small motor lawn-care tools. The new law requires small small-motor landscaping equipment to be zero-emission, meaning that they must be battery-powered or plug-in, by 2024.

Because of COVID-19, more and more of people are working at home and having to deal with the irritating whine of leaf blowers and the dust particles which they create. As a result, many communities across the country have passed laws that either restrict or ban the use of leaf blowers with the goal of improving noise and air pollution.

Swampscott tried once to pass a bylaw addressing leaf blowers, but the measure failed. For the benefit of our neighborhood environment, it's time the town took the matter up again.

Toni Bandrowicz, President
Swampscott Conservancy