

Nature in the Neighborhood – November 2023

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 almost constant drone of leaf blowers.

But there's a movement afoot to skip both the Fall raking and blowing of leaves. This movement led to a recent October N.Y. Times article “Why You Don't Need to Rake Leaves” and the National Wildlife Federation designating October as “Leave the Leaves Month.” blog.nwf.org/2023/10/pro-tips-for-leaving-the-leaves/

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, the majority of butterflies and moths overwinter in the landscape as eggs, caterpillars, or chrysalises. So putting off the Autumnal cleanup – or forgoing it all together – is one of the most valuable things you can do to protect and help native pollinators thrive.

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 as a food source.

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

In a 2020 blog, Massachusetts Audubon provided the following tips to make your Fall garden cleanup easier on you as well as more pollinator-friendly:

- 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.

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

If you’re concerned that leaving a thick layer of leaves will block light and stunt grass growth, leaves can be raked off the lawn and into flower and shrub beds.

And, if you’re planning 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 online guidance on when to tackle garden clean up in the Spring. See: xerces.org/blog/dont-spring-into-garden-cleanup-too-soon For instance, for cool-season areas, when the soil temperature reaches 50 degrees and lawns begin growing, it’s probably a safe bet that most pollinators have emerged.

So, we at the Conservancy hope you’ll take a break from the raking and bagging this Fall. Leave the leaves, and enjoy the season!

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 while also compacting the 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 leaf blowers present a particular problem for landscape crews who spend the day breathing the emitted airborne particulates which may contain dust, mold, pollen, and chemicals from herbicides and pesticides. Not to mention that

gas-powered engines emissions, such as carbon monoxide and non-methane hydrocarbon, contribute to air pollution and global warming.

In the aftermath of the pandemic, more and more people are working at home, having to deal with the irritating whine of leaf blowers and the dust particles they create.

That is why many communities across the country – including Swampscott and Marblehead – now have laws that either restrict or ban the use of leaf blowers. The bonus of this new goal, to minimize noise and air pollution, is the protection of habitat for pollinators and other wildlife that we look forward to seeing in Spring in our neighborhood.