

Nature in the Neighborhood – November 2025

Turn Over a New Leaf

"And all at once, summer collapsed into fall." – Oscar Wilde

It's definitely starting to look and feel like fall. The temperature is dropping and so are the leaves off the trees.

You may have heard that there is a movement underfoot to "leave the leaves" and not rake, bag, and landfill them. Instead, just letting them remain in place to act as a natural mulch. This movement is garnering support from a wide array of groups, as diverse as the National Wildlife Federation (NWF) and Better Home & Gardens.

Leaving the leaves not only boosts the health of your garden but benefits the nature in our neighborhood as well. 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 forgoing the autumnal cleanup is one of the most valuable things you can do to protect and help native pollinators thrive. And it's not just pollinators who profit. Leaf litter is also a haven for birds, turtles, toads, and other wildlife, serving as nesting and hiding places, and as a food source.

By forming a natural mulch, fallen leaves also help suppress weeds and, as the leaves break down, they return important nutrients to the soil. Store bought mulch often lacks these nutrients and may contain chemicals that leach into the ground, harming plants and animals. The layer of leaves also keeps the soil warmer in winter and cooler in summer and reduces evaporation so plant roots keep hydrated.

In short, leaving the leaves is good for wildlife and good for your garden.

It also helps in combating climate change. When leaves are sent to landfills, they decompose without oxygen, producing methane—a greenhouse gas that contributes to climate change. By keeping the leaves in your yard, or composting them, you can help fight climate change and reduce your carbon footprint.

It is recommended, however, to rake leaves off your lawn and into plant beds or a designated compost area as leaving a thick layer of leaves on the lawn will block light and stunt grass growth

The NWF has a useful tip sheet on "Where and How to Leave the Leaves:"
www.nwf.org/-/media/Documents/PDFs/Garden-for-Wildlife/Tip-Sheets/How-to-Leave-the-Leaves.pdf.

If you're planning a clean-up in the spring, it's best to wait until later 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: xerces.org/blog/dont-spring-into-garden-cleanup-too-soon. For instance, in cool-season areas such as ours, you should wait until the soil temperature reaches 50 degrees and lawns begin growing back in. By then it's probably a safe bet that most pollinators have emerged.

So, we hope you'll consider turning over a new leaf and taking a break from raking and bagging leaves in our neighborhood this fall!

A Word on Gas-Powered Leaf Blowers

Autumn also means that the sounds of summer are being replaced with those of fall: the rustling of leaves underfoot, buzz of katydids and crickets at night, honking geese heading south, and – unfortunately – the almost constant drone of 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 www.audubon.org/magazine/why-cities-are-taking-action-limit-loud-polluting-lawn-care

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

That is why many communities across the country – including Swampscott and Marblehead – now have laws that either ban or restrict the use of gas-powered leaf blowers. Not only do these laws minimize noise and air pollution, but they also protect the habitat of the pollinators and other wildlife we look forward to seeing in spring in our neighborhood.

Note that [Nature in the Neighborhood](#) is off next month. We'll see you again in January!