

Give Nature a Hand – Just Leave the Leaves
by Sarah Meadows

Nothing says “Fall” like piles of fragrant, colorful leaves that are so inviting for kids and dogs to jump into. As days grow shorter, homeowners get the urge to do a fall cleanup, cutting back spent flower stalks and bagging or blowing leaves to the curb awaiting the giant truck vacuum. Many folks strive to have the neat appearance of a bare lawn or flower bed. It’s a tradition we may need to re-evaluate.

If you want to be a friend to birds, butterflies, bees and all the myriad of tiny creatures that make the natural world run as it should, RESIST the urge for such neatness. Nature is not neat. Look around the next time you are in a forest or other natural area: there are decomposing logs and branches, leaves slowly breaking down to nourish the soil, and seed heads from last season’s flowers. Nature needs a certain amount of disorder to feed birds and animals over the winter and to protect birds and insects from the cold. Moreover, leaves are a FREE source of mulch and nutrients. Leaves are not litter!

Birds need standing seed heads to supply food. Ground-nesting bumblebee queens that burrow underground need a layer of insulation above them to survive to lay their eggs in spring. Those lovely piles of leaves contain hundreds of chrysalises of next summer’s moths and butterflies – they often look just like a dried leaf! That’s why shredding your leaves destroys the next generation of winged beauties. Keep them whole if you can.

Of course, some control of leaves is necessary to keep them out of culverts, ditches and inclines that flow into storm drains. Clear these areas and put those leaves into your wild area or around trees in the landscape. Remove diseased plants from the vegetable garden and do not compost them.

The Xerces Society and other conservation groups recommend these best practices to deal with end of season chores:

- Redefine “the perfect lawn” – neat often means sterile.
- Save the stems – many native bees overwinter inside hollow plant stems.
Cut these back in spring once you see native bees and honeybees buzzing.
- Leave the leaves – keep a thin layer of leaves on the lawn and gently rake as many leaves as you can into beds or into a wild area of your yard; you can shred them after bees start to emerge in spring..
- Save a snag – standing snags provide habitat for a variety of critters.
- Build a brush pile or rock pile – create habitat for birds, insects and small mammals.
- Provide a safe, shallow water source – birds and insects need to drink year-round.
- Erect a natural habitat sign – educate your friends and neighbors about what you are doing in your yard.

You really don't have to work so hard for your fall cleanup. Relax and enjoy the season!

Xerces' guide, [Nesting and overwintering habitat for pollinators and other beneficial insects](#), is a great resource for learning more about the nesting and overwintering requirements of insects and what you can do to improve the habitat in your yard, garden, or neighborhood.

Buzzin' Around is an occasional feature written by members of the Hillsborough Garden Club in support of Hillsborough as a Bee City USA

