

Garden Non-cleanup By Garry Annibal

“When can I clean up my garden in the spring?” is an oft-asked question when temperatures warm and we start to enjoy more hours of daylight. In response, it is better to adopt a philosophy rather than a specific date, and that is to follow the policies of frat boys when it comes to cleaning: “Put it off as long as possible and then do as little as necessary.”

It is tempting to get outside and work in the garden as soon as the weather allows in the first part of the year. But we know it is too early to put out tender annuals, and the overwintered perennials are just barely sprouting and need no more than a casual nod of recognition. For those of us used to the traditional style of gardening the sight of dead vegetation on our flowerbeds is an anathema, and the desire to clean up is strong enough to overcome our awareness of why we left the vegetation in place last fall—to protect the butterflies and other living creatures that make their homes in our gardens.

A recent article by [Justin Wheeler](#) of the Xerces Society for Invertebrate Conservation advocates “Don’t Spring Into Garden Cleanup Too Soon,” and he goes over some of the simple “rules of thumb” that gardeners use as their green light to get into cleanup mode. One of the guidelines he points out is to ask yourself if you’ve paid your taxes (tax day falls in mid-April). Another suggests waiting until the apples and pears finish blooming—sometime between mid-April and mid-May. The more ambitious gardeners use the milepost of putting away the snow shovels as a clue to take out the rakes. Another idea is to not clean up the garden until it is time to plant tomatoes outdoors—that is, until all danger of frost is past and the soil temperature reaches 50 degrees Fahrenheit. Another idea is to join the [No Mow May](#) movement and extend it from your lawn to the rest of the garden, leaving the leaves, dead stalks, and mulch until June. Some gardeners who like numerical landmarks follow the 5/50 rule—that is, wait until spring brings 5 days of 50 degrees. However, they never explain if they mean 5 consecutive days, or if they mean the temperature must hit at least 50 degrees, or if the temperature must not go below 50 degrees. Douglas Tallamy succinctly explains this matter in a blog post from March 30, 2021 titled “[Leaf Litter: Love It And Leave It.](#)” He also considers a technique used by agriculture extension specialists who predict the development of insects based on the measuring of degree-days. For a more detailed explanation of degree-days see [Predicting Insect Development Using Degree Days](#), by the Entomology Department at the University of Kentucky.

No matter which approach you follow, the thing to remember is that some insects winter over in the leaf litter as eggs, larvae, or even adults, and these take different amounts of time and temperature to progress to their next life stage. By not disturbing your garden too early in the year, you will give these insects time to complete the next phase of their life cycle.

You can “neaten up” your garden in certain ways without doing too much damage.. Some insect-conscious gardeners use the chop and drop method by cutting standing stalks, letting them fall where they stood, and leaving them there. Others will carefully stack the cuttings in a brush pile rather than chopping them up into the compost heap. If you have hollow-stemmed plants that bees or wasps may have used to lay their eggs in, leave at least 18 inches of stalk remaining after you cut off the tops. However, the best way to do no harm is to do nothing. As the season progresses the standing stalks will crumble and fall and the leaves will decompose and enrich the soil and the invertebrates that they protected all winter and into spring or summer will propagate and add to the beauty of your garden.

So before you rake up the leaf litter or chop down the stalks of last year’s plants, ask yourself why you left it all there last autumn. If the answer is to benefit the “little things that run the world” (in the late E.O. Wilson’s words), you should let the little beasties complete their life cycles and not short-circuit the work you began last fall.

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