

RETHINK THE FALL CLEAN-UP

Abridged from an article by Jennifer Rotermund

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Autumn is a time when we often feel compelled to take stock of what we have and clear out what is no longer needed. For many, putting the garden to bed in the Fall means that one should cut everything to the ground, rake up and throw away all of the leaves and fallen debris, and generally make everything look very neat and tidy. But the work of “cutting back” plants actually stimulates growth if some green still remains in the stems/leaves, and robs plant roots of some of the final photosynthesizing material of the season.

A thick, warm blanket of leaves and fallen-over perennial stalks keep Winter’s eventual frost from touching the soil. Layers of old fern fronds, bowing down to the ground, provide shelter to small birds through a cold Winter storm. Summer flowers turn into mini food banks in seed pod form, delivering necessary sustenance to our wildlife through Winter’s time of scarcity. When I think about “putting the garden to bed” (and I do, just like everyone else), I remind myself that Spring cleaning is my time to clean-up and clear-out the garden. Once Winter’s cold hands have released their grip, when both the air and the soil temperatures are lifting new growth back up from the garden bed, that is when I prune and clip and rake and prepare for the new growing season.

Of course, there are a few exceptions to this light-handed approach to the Fall clean-up, and a balance of the practical can be weighed here.

- **Maintain pathways for safety purposes**, if regularly traveled. Composted leaves can be slippery.
- **Rake fallen leaves directly into garden beds as mulch, being careful not to smother small plants.** A few rare trees, such as Black Walnut and Eucalyptus, through a process called allelopathy, suppress the growth of any plant covered in the tree’s leaves. Don’t use those leaves for mulch.
- **Pull any Invasive plants** that may have taken hold
- **Rake up the leaves and any fallen fruit from fruit trees** - pests and fungi can overwinter in the fallen leaves and reinfect the tree the following year if not cleaned-up.

True, our gardens are ours. We can’t help but feel a sense of ownership over something we tend and manage so carefully. Yet, it’s not just us and the plants in the garden. There’s a rich diversity of life out there - much of it also tending and caring for the garden. And, it’s so easy to do our part to care for it. Now, at the beginning of Autumn, with the return of the rains, is the time to begin again. 