



Nature Speaks: The Delights of Mabon - Rethinking the Fall Clean-Up!

Article by Jennifer Rotermund

“Life starts all over again when it gets crisp in the Fall.”

F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*

I was a sun-lover when I moved to Seattle 15 years ago. Growing up in Upstate NY, I experienced Summers that were warm and humid. The sun was life-giving, and life outdoors was vibrant and verdant. My Summer vacations were filled with hours of napping on our soft green lawn, long days running and climbing through the woods and nearby mountains, or on family road trips searching for the best forest creek full of rocks on which to explore and climb. So, it was with this youthful enthusiasm that I approached my new life, all those years ago, as a newly transplanted north westerner, only to discover Summer in the northwest is our dry season. Our lawns go dormant and look dead, humidity levels remain low, and nature retracts, seeking refuge from the sun, awaiting the return of life-giving rain. I was a sun-lover when I moved to Seattle. Now, I love rain. In Seattle, rain is life. Rain is countless kernels of liquid life gifted to us free of charge, landing directly on our trees and in our gardens. It's a soothing balm that heals a dry crust of soil made angry by the Summer sun. Rain is cleansing and refreshing. I love feeling its return in September - and the return of Autumn.

The Great Medicine Wheel turns to the Western Gate as we welcome Autumn's return. Mabon, an ancient term for the Autumnal Equinox, marks the brief time in September when the Sun aligns with the Earth's equator, and the length of day and night are roughly equal. However, the days are shortening quickly now. And as we spend more time indoors, so too - if we allow it - do we find ourselves turning inward, slowing down and reflecting. Our ancestors would spend the coming few weeks pulling in their final harvests (just as we do now in our p-patches and vegetable gardens) and collecting seed for next year's crop. In fact, similar to Spring, Autumn is a time when we often feel compelled to take stock of what we have and clear out what is no longer needed. This is a natural process we feel, perhaps now encoded into our DNA after so many generations. This drive, I believe, is what gave us the phrase I hear every Fall called, "putting the garden to bed." I love that phrase. It's perfect for this time of year, but I think the value and true meaning held within the wisdom of that phrase has been somewhat altered over the years.

Typically, when clients call me in to "put the garden to bed" in the Fall, they include requests to 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 when I think from the perspective of the soil life - from the beneficial fungi to the beloved earthworms - or when I think about the neighborhood birds over-wintering outdoors, and then I think about "putting the garden to bed," I imagine a thick, warm blanket of leaves and fallen-over perennial stalks keeping Winter's eventual frost from touching the soil. I picture layers of old fern fronds, bowing

down to the ground, providing shelter to small birds through a cold Winter storm. I think about my Summer flowers, turned 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. But in Autumn, I remember that just because I'm spending more time indoors, doesn't mean that the wildlife outdoors has that luxury.

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. Pathways need to be maintained, if regularly traveled, for safety purposes - composted leaves can be slippery. Rake fallen leaves directly into garden beds as mulch, being careful not to smother small plants. Also, invasive plants that may have taken hold while everyone was away on Summer vacation still need to be pulled out, or else Spring cleaning could feel unnecessarily disheartening as these weeds take hold at a fresh new pace in March. Then, 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. Finally, it's best to rake up the leaves and any fallen fruit from fruit trees - pests and fungi can over-winter 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.

Jennifer Rotermund is the owner of Gaiaceous Gardens (an urban farming & wildlife gardening business with a teaching garden/urban farm and certified wildlife habitat/ sacred sanctuary located in Shoreline. She is a Permaculture Designer, is certified by the National Wildlife Federation as a Habitat Steward and serves as a Docent at the Kruckeberg Garden. She is also an ordained minister with a particular focus on earth-based forms of spirituality.

Article reprinted courtesy of Shoreline Area News at ShorelineAreaNews.com

