Conservation Corner

*Conservation Corner is a weekly article produced by the Forest County Land &Water Conservation Department. For more information contact Steve Kircher, County Conservationist-Land Information/GIS Director at 715-478-1387 or by e-mail at* *lcc@co.forest.wi.us**.*

This time of year, many of you are probably thinking of closing down and cleaning up your gardens. There are many reasons NOT to clean up your garden in the fall. What we do in them every autumn can either enhance or inhibit that role. Here are some reasons to ‘leave the mess’ in fall and wait until spring to tidy your gardens

**The Butterflies (and moths):** While the monarch flies south to overwinter in Mexico, most other butterflies stay put and take shelter somewhere dry and safe until spring. Some butterflies, like the mourning cloak, comma, question mark, and Milbert’s tortoise shell, overwinter as adults. They nestle into rock fissures, under tree bark, or in leaf litter until the days grow longer again and spring arrives. Butterflies that overwinter in a chrysalis include the swallowtail family, the cabbage whites and the sulphurs. Many of these chrysalises can be found either hanging from dead plant stems or tucked into the soil or leaf litter.

**The Birds**: Insect-eating birds, like chickadees, wrens, titmice, nuthatches, phoebes, and bluebirds are very welcome in the garden because they consume thousands of caterpillars and other pest insects as they raise their young every gardening season. Not cleaning up the garden means there will be more protein-rich insects available to them during the coldest part of the year.

These birds are quite good at gleaning “hibernating” insects off of dead plant stems, branches, and out of leaf litter. The more insect-nurturing habitat you have, the greater the bird population will be.

**The Native Bees**: Many of North America’s 3,500-plus species of native bees need a place to spend the winter that’s protected from cold and predators. They may hunker down under a piece of peeling tree bark, or they may stay tucked away in the hollow stem of a bee balm plant or an ornamental grass. Some spend the winter as an egg or larvae in a burrow in the ground.

**The Ladybugs**: North America is home to over 400 different ladybug species, many of which are not red with black polka-dots. While the introduced Asian multicolored ladybug comes into our homes for the winter and becomes quite a nuisance, none of our native ladybug species have any interest in spending the winter inside of your house.

Most of them enter the insect world’s version of hibernation (diapause) soon after the temperatures drop and spend the colder months tucked under a pile of leaves, nestled at the base of a plant, or hidden under a rock. Most overwinter in groups of anywhere from a few individuals to thousands of adults. Ladybugs are notorious pest eaters, each one consuming dozens of soft-bodied pest insects and insect eggs every day.

**The Predatory Insects**: Ladybugs aren’t the only predatory insects who spend the winter in an intact garden. Assassin bugs, lacewings, flower bugs, damsel bugs, ground beetles, and scores of other pest- munching predatory insects spend the winter “sleeping” in your garden as either adults, eggs, or pupae.

To have a balanced population of these predatory insects, you have to have winter habitat - when spring arrives, they’ll be better able to keep early-emerging pests in check if they’ve spent the winter on-site, instead of over in the neighbor’s yard.

**The People**: If the previous five reasons aren’t enough to inspire you to hold off cleaning up the garden, there’s one final reason to the list: *You.* There is so much beauty to be found in a winter garden: snow on dried seed pods, berries clinging to branches, goldfinches flitting around spent sunflowers, juncos hopping beneath goldenrod fronds, frost kissing the autumn leaves, and ice collected on blades of ornamental grasses.

Delaying your garden’s clean up until the spring is a boon for all the creatures living there. Instead of heading out to the garden with a pair of pruning shears and a rake this fall, wait until next April. By then, all the critters living there will be emerging from their long winter nap. And even if they haven’t managed to get out of bed by the time you head out to the garden, most of them will still manage to find their way out of a loosely layered compost pile before it begins to decompose.