

***Protecting Clean Water Together Series: A Kinder, Gentler Fall Cleanup —  
That's Better for the Garden***

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***CAPTION: The larvae of Pennsylvania's official insect, the firefly *Photuris pensylvanica*, overwinter in soil or leaf litter. Fall raking and mowing can prevent them from surviving to fill your summer evenings with magic. Give the bugs a break! Leave at least some of the leaves.***

Fall cleanup is a time-honored tradition for some homeowners. Raking. Burning. Raking again. Cutting back all those floppy plants. Deadheading. Carting dead stuff away. Then raking some more.

But wait! Going into winter with a stripped-clean lawn and garden beds is actually a terrible idea. All kinds of insects, birds and other critters that are good for people and plants need you to leave a little bit of mess in garden beds — and even lawn — to help them make it through the winter.

Butterflies, beetles, bumble bees, and other pollinators overwinter in soil, plant stems, and leaves. Mated bumble bee queens spend the winter just a few inches beneath the soil surface. Unlike the famous Monarch, most butterflies and moths don't go south — they spend the winter right in your garden, whether as caterpillar, egg, chrysalis, or adult. Many of them attach to leaves and pine needles, stems and seeds, and rely on that “roof” of fallen leaves for insulation from cold and ice. Worms, spiders, millipedes — they all have their place, improving the soil and as food for birds, turtles, frogs and salamanders.

In other words, without the protection that leaf litter provides, all kinds of critters your garden needs won't survive the winter.

Think how glad you'll be to see more bees and butterflies when spring rolls around again! Don't mow or bag leaves. Use your rechargeable blower to drift them into borders and beds, over the vegetable patch, in piles around the perimeter and into the woods. And leave a loose layer of leaves on the lawn — a thin patchwork won't cause problems for the grass, while still providing a cold-weather buffer.

While you're at it, re-consider deadheading. Deadheading removes important food sources that juncos, titmice, sparrows, blue jays and small mammals depend on. That profusion of seeds from your Joe Pye weed, Queen Anne's Lace, and Black-eyed Susan is a winter smorgasbord for them.

A more natural garden also protects drinking water. As leaves break down in place they enrich the soil, and over time improve soil's ability to hold water, filter impurities, and prevent flooding.

Give your back a break. Retire the rake!

For more information about the benefits of “messy” gardening go to:

<https://crownbees.com/pages/the-advantages-of-a-messy-lawn-and-garden?srsltid=AfmBOoq0fZOjylRaD8bfFihCHDXUP01cLTqwlacEA4zAFz8zmdkGnVJi>

**The Brodhead Watershed Association protects water quality and quantity throughout our area. Get involved! Become a member!**

**[www.brodheadwatershed.org](http://www.brodheadwatershed.org)**