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Thoughtful fall garden cleanup has ecological benefits

Steve Conaway Special to the Telegram & Gazette USA TODAY NETWORK

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At the end of a busy gardening season, I often look a little like one of the critters that calls the garden home. By the time I visit the barber, I am ready to shed the scraggle of summer. The garden can inspire the same urge: cut everything down, rake everything out, and restore order before winter. Ecological fall cleanup asks us to resist that dramatic reset. Instead, move slowly, notice what each area needs, and make deliberate choices. Spent stems, seed heads, leaves, and plant debris can protect soil, feed birds, shelter insects, and keep the garden alive after the flowers fade.

Think of fall cleanup as curation rather than clearing: observe first, identify the purpose of a task, and intervene only as much as necessary. Paths, drainage, turf, and vegetable beds may need attention for access or plant health. Perennial borders, shrub edges, and meadow-like plantings can often remain standing or receive only a light edit. A crisp edge or carefully cut back planting can signal care without removing valuable habitat and winter structure.

Seed heads are an easy place to practice restraint. Gardeners often plant coneflower and asters for wildlife, then deadhead them out of habit, leaving bewildered goldfinches with no seeds to eat. Before deadheading, I try to ask whether the task improves the garden or removes the resource the planting was meant to provide. Sometimes ecological care means choosing not to act.

Rather than cutting every spent stalk at once, spread the work across the seasons.

Leave sturdy, seed-rich plants through winter, then shorten or remove them gradually in late winter or spring. This extends foraging time, preserves shelter, and maintains form when the garden might otherwise feel oh-so flat. Keep what contributes food, habitat, or architecture; remove what is diseased, collapsed, or smothering. This approach composes a beautiful winter landscape as well as habitat for garden friends.

Stems deserve the same patience. Beneficial insects overwinter in hollow or pithy stems, curled leaves, leaf litter, and soil. Where cutting is necessary, leave 12 to 18 inches of sturdy stem, especially on native perennials. Remove material that is diseased, heavily pest-infested, smothering a crown, or blocking a walkway. Otherwise, leave it in place or gather healthy stems loosely in a brush pile until spring emergence has passed. The question is not simply whether to clean up, but when, where, and how much.

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Insect hotels, bug snugs, and pollinator houses can put material from a gradual cleanup to good use. As you shorten flopping grasses or cut pithy stems, save suitable pieces to create nesting spaces for native bees and other beneficial insects. Curated care also means maintaining these garden features rather than treating them as permanent decorations. Old nesting tubes, occupied stems, and damp debris harbor parasites and disease. Replace deteriorating material in stages so these structures remain healthy habitats, like fine establishments rather than neglected motels.

Leaves also call for thoughtful redistribution rather than wholesale removal. In beds they moderate soil temperature, retain moisture, feed soil organisms, and shelter wildlife. Thick mats can smother turf or small plants, so move leaves into robust beds, around trees, or into compost. Shred some leaves where a finer mulch is useful and leave others whole where habitat is the priority. Bumble bee queens, firefly larvae, beetles, and luna moth pupae may all depend on intact leaf

litter. Match the treatment to the place instead of applying one rule everywhere.

Vegetable gardens require a special balance. Remove crop debris showing disease, heavy insect pressure, or rotting fruit to reduce problems next season. Putting beds to rest, however, does not require stripping or tilling the soil. Avoiding tillage protects soil structure, fungal networks, and organisms that support roots. After removing problem material, cover exposed ground with compost, chopped leaves, or other organic mulch.

Remember that ecological fall gardening is not neglect; it replaces one size fits all tasks with informed care. The same curated approach can guide every garden activity: pause, observe, choose the tasks for each situation, and allow the garden time to respond. When cleanup becomes a gradual collaboration rather than a seasonal buzzcut, fall becomes another moment to care for the garden in a way that informs every season.

Gardening Central Mass. offers ecologically focused tips and helpful stories for home gardeners from the New England Botanic Garden at Tower Hill team. Located in Boylston, New England Botanic Garden creates experiences with plants that inspire people and improve the world. Learn more at nebg.org. The column is published on the third Sunday of the month.