

Our Master Gardener's Timely Tips for Spring: Spring Garden Clean-up

We need to be patient in our gardens when the first warm days of spring arrive. Don't be too quick to clean up your garden.

The insects that survived winter in your leaf litter are still there. They haven't emerged yet. And a March clean-up kills them at the last stage of their development.

If you left leaves in your garden beds over winter — whether on purpose or by accident — the moths, butterflies, and firefly larvae that overwintered in those leaves are still developing. Luna moth cocoons are still wrapped in fallen leaves. Queen bumblebees are still in shallow chambers under the leaf mat. Firefly larvae are still in the soil just below the surface.

Most of them are two to four weeks from emerging as adults. They survived five months of winter. They need the leaves to stay in place for a few more weeks.

Raking, blowing, or bagging those leaves “now” removes their habitat just before the finish line.

The rule — wait until May:

Don't remove leaf litter from garden beds, tree bases, or fence lines until daytime temperatures have been consistently above sixty degrees for a week or more. By then most overwintering pupae have emerged as adults, queen bumblebees have left to start new colonies, and firefly larvae have moved deeper below the disturbance zone.

The difference between a March clean-up and a May clean-up in terms of insect survival is enormous — most of the moths and butterflies that would have emerged from your leaf litter are lost to a March removal.

What to do with the messy six weeks:

Push leaves to the edges of your lawn and put them underneath shrubs, along fence lines, and into garden beds. The edges are where most overwintering insects are anyway.

Run a mower over leaves on the lawn at the highest blade setting — shredded leaves fall between grass blades as mulch and decompose in a few weeks while the larger leaf pieces along edges stay undisturbed.

Leave garden beds, tree bases, and fence lines alone until May. All flower bulbs will capably poke through the leaf litter for your enjoyment. The leaves will not hinder the bulbs from blooming.

This is how you can encourage pollinators in your garden.

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