

Don't Be An Obsessive Fall Garden Cleaner

AGRI-VIEWS

by Chuck Otte, Geary County Extension Agent

Gardeners, and I am one, tend to often get carried away in the fall when it comes time to start cleaning up. We want to just scour the landscape clean so that once spring comes it'll appear to green up quicker and look springier quicker. These are totally understandable and well meaning, but at times they can do more harm than good.

There are certainly times, for safety or for plant disease suppression, that a "clean sweep" is probably the right approach. Ornamental grasses, such as pampas grass, become highly flammable after they dry down. If these grasses are next to your house or other buildings it is probably a good idea to cut them down to a short (six inches) height early in the fall to reduce that fire risk. Perennial plants like peonies can really get loaded up with leaf diseases and one of the best ways to reduce the disease level is to cut the plants off at ground level in the fall and haul all those old disease laden leaves away from the peony bed. But once we get past those points, some of this over zealotness may be detrimental to the natural world around us.

What do I mean about it being detrimental to the natural world? What we see as dead plants that we need to remove can be food and shelter for many species. Many insects will overwinter in the stems of annual and perennial herbaceous plants (plants that die to the ground). If you've ever watched a woodpecker hammering away on a sunflower stalk, that's what it's doing. It's locating and pulling out a small insect larvae or pupa. Small finches on the old flower heads of that same sunflower are carefully extracting the seeds produced by that flower. Sparrows scratching around on the ground in a patch of pigweeds, kochia, or lambsquarter are busy harvesting the small seeds that have fallen off those plants.

An un-mowed natural area, even just a flower bed that is left uncleaned, creates a lot of cover for many creatures. Butterflies and moths often have their overwintering cocoons or chrysalises in these undisturbed areas. Some caterpillars even over winter as a caterpillar on the ground under all that old residue which serves as insulation from weather and protection from predators. With that said there are also some insect pests like grasshoppers and squash bugs that depend on untilled soil and residue in the vegetable garden to overwinter so that's a place that I would encourage cleaning up and tilling up!

I can hear some folks saying that those unmown and uncleaned areas will also provide shelter for mice and other vermin and they are correct. But those little critters are part of the food chain that hawks, owls, even foxes, coyotes and bobcats depend on to survive the winter. Many of those small rodents are also not prone to coming inside your homes anyway.

On these pages in recent weeks I've discussed why and when it's okay to not rake the leaves. It's fine to mow over them and leave them on the lawn to break down. This also returns a lot of nutrients back to the soil in your lawn for your grass and trees to use. Consider it natural slow release fertilizer! But once we move beyond the few areas and situations that I described, leave the rest of the yard alone. There's plenty of other things you could be doing anyway. Things like cleaning windows, weatherizing your house, watching football games.

Leaving your cleanup until spring is not being lazy. There are plenty of other activities you can do right now. The natural world gets along fine without us and it will do better if we just don't be in a hurry. March and April will be here soon enough. When those nice days of late winter and early spring roll around, you can start cleaning up then. In the meantime, just let the natural world do its thing!