

Life Beneath the Fallen Leaves

It is the end of October in New England and the leaves are falling fast. This is nothing new since fossil records show trees have been dropping their leaves for more than 130 million years. But this fact offers small comfort to those of us who feel the need to “do something” about all those leaves.

Perhaps we've been trying to change our gardening ways, keeping in mind the health of the earth and the local ecosystem. We've eliminated the use of harmful pesticides and planted native species. We have shrunk the lawn a little bit or a lot, allowing nature to reclaim areas where we don't need or want so much turf grass. Our reward has been the appearance of beneficial pollinators like bees, moths, and butterflies browsing over the fleabane, asters, native milkweed and goldenrod, sturdy wildflowers that grew tall where we stopped mowing.

We've refrained from using noisy and destructive leaf blowers that pollute the air and disturb whatever life was sheltering under the leaves. Better to scoop our leaves up and toss them onto the compost heap. Then in spring, dig it all back into the garden since now those composted leaves have turned into the most perfect natural fertilizer you could ever want.

Another approach to leaf management is shredding by mowing. This creates instant organic matter in the form of finely chopped leafy mulch to replenish the lawn. But there is a downside to shredding which is the loss of potential invertebrate habitat if we had allowed our leaves to pile up and decompose over time. A better way would be to rake them into areas where we no longer mow, allowing them to accumulate under trees or against a back fence. Then don't disturb those piles until May because that is where all the action is, where life is being renewed. Ground-nesting bees, butterfly and moth pupae, caterpillars, spiders, snails, slugs, beetles, worms and mites are finding shelter there. Meanwhile, microscopic invertebrates are breaking down the leaves to create a rich, peaty loam filled with nutrients to feed tree roots, grasses, shrubs, and plants.

We should also resist cutting down dead flower stalks poking out of the perennial garden. While 70 percent of native bees nest underground, 30%

will burrow into hollow stems to find shelter. Dried flower heads offer nutritious seeds for sparrows, juncos, finches and chickadees during lean times and these, too, should be left standing.

When fully decomposed, leaves give up essential chemicals like phosphorus and nitrogen, the building blocks for creation of buds, flowers, and new green or woody growth. During periods of drought, a robust layer of leaves helps the earth retain moisture. Toads and salamanders, robins and sparrows are sustained by whatever worms or other invertebrates they can find under leaves, and nesting birds seek proteinaceous bits to feed their young. It's a never-ending process of decomposition and renewal with fallen leaves providing the energy.

So, while we clear the drains, put away the lawn furniture, clean out the gutters, and haul hoses into the shed, let's remember to "Leave the Leaves" wherever we can. On a cold winter's night, we should feel warmed by the thought of all that quiet activity going on beneath our cozy leaf piles. Imagine how many creatures are safely sheltering there. Be glad for fallen leaves that play a critical role in sustaining life. Just as they have done on earth now for thousands of years.