

## GARDEN MYTHS DEBUNKED - Edition II

Sometimes gardeners are influenced by old customs or advice that may not reflect the latest thinking. Here are a few myths and facts to help you rethink your gardening maintenance.



### **Myth: All gardens should be mulched**

**FACT:** While many gardeners spend hundreds of dollars and a lot of effort every year surrounding their trees and garden areas with tree bark mulch, a “green” or “living mulch” ground cover is unquestionably more economical, colorful and beneficial. Native ground covers offer weed suppression, their roots help with erosion control and the

dense foliage of living mulch helps retain soil moisture and enhance the overall biodiversity. They also allow ground-nesting bees and other beneficial insects access to the soil. About 70% of bees are ground nesting and are responsible for pollinating 80% of the world’s flowering plants.

Spreading natives like ferns, wild geranium, moss phlox, and golden groundsel provide habitat and nectar to bees and pollinators, while offering a colorful display. Used among trees, shrubs, and rocks in the garden, these plants will continue to fill in over time. Seedlings can be dug and placed where desired.



### **Myth: Native gardens don’t provide enough color or interest**

**FACT:** Many native plants boast vibrant blooms in glorious colors, attracting wildlife while making your yard beautiful year-round. From the bright pink coneflowers, purple asters, brilliant red cardinal flower to golden black-eyed Susans, native species provide stunning visual appeal.

With careful planning you can have flowering from spring to fall. Many native seed catalogs and on-line resources offer free design plans. Flowering shrubs and trees, such as redbud, serviceberry, flowering dogwood, red chokeberry and button bush not only provide and structure all season, but also provide fruit and a place for birds, insects and wildlife to nest and forage. Native grasses, sedges and rushes tolerate many kinds of soil and provide texture and movement to your garden. Ferns offer a delicate touch and make an easy-care ground cover. Native evergreen trees and shrubs like American holly, Eastern red cedar, inkberry and mountain laurel assure year-long form and interest.

### **Myth: Leaves, debris and dead standing trees are messy**

**FACT:** “Messy” gardens don’t have to be ugly or devoid of worth. Gardens maintained for optimum ecological benefit are not manicured, but they can still be very attractive.

For instance, decaying leaves provide a protective home for birds, insects and amphibians. Gather autumn leaves into garden beds, around trees and lawn edges. If you have large quantities, combine the leaves with other yard waste into brush and compost piles, which will generate valuable soil amendments and will also provide wildlife habitat.

Many birds and small mammals depend on the seeds in spent flowerheads, which are high in fat and carbohydrates, for their fall and winter diet. Thus, avoid deadheading (removing spent flowers), which will provide for surprise volunteers and reduce your workload. Many seedheads are also attractive in winter.

Many bees and other insects overwinter in the stems of native grasses and wildflowers. If you don't like the appearance of these stems in winter, they can be trimmed to a height of 10-18 inches without losing this benefit.

Even dead trees can be a vital resource for birds and other animals. Try to leave them where they pose no risk to people or structures; cutting back to 15-20 feet will minimize the risk.

Many conventional gardening practices are rooted in outdated assumptions which now may need updating. Whether it is a change toward better ways to work with nature (using a living mulch or leaving the leaves), or simply changing our ideas what's aesthetically pleasing (deadheading), the start of a new year is a good time to reassess your ideas.