

Spring and Fall Habitat Garden Care for Pollinator Conservation

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Native Plant Gardens at Lake Nokomis, Minneapolis MN

The Nokomis Naturescape was planted in 1998 with three *native plant habitat* gardens. This distinct type of gardening partners with nature, striving to provide food and shelter (habitat) to diverse native wildlife. The Naturescape demonstration gardens are maintained by volunteers* - chiefly native plant enthusiasts. We have learned through the years to modify our fall and spring clean-up routines with the goal of minimizing disturbance to beneficial wildlife. Our maintenance role is to enhance their shelter and ability to overwinter successfully. After all, pollinators make the world go round!

In the Fall, Less is More

There are many good reasons to leave things as they stand in the fall. It can be an adjustment to abandon the long-standing garden practice of raking and clipping the garden clean. Tidy zeal eliminates many creatures playing a vital role in a healthy ecosystem. Native bees, butterflies, moths, ladybugs, birds plus many more in the web of life, receive habitat benefits if we simply let the gardens be. People, too, are given the nature connection of a nuanced landscape with a sense of place. For instance, snow-capped dried seed heads add winter interest while providing wildlife food and shelter. Sure, some fall maintenance is required, i.e. weeding invasive species, keeping clear edges and debris from streets, but the approach is deliberately gentle.

In the Spring, Tend with Care

When spring finally arrives in Minnesota, the urge to poke around in the garden comes natural. We want to get outside, look for emerging plants and often to "clean-up". How to garden *care-fully* with native wildlife habitat in mind first and foremost? In early spring, many beneficial insects are not active yet, some still in hibernation, nesting or in pupae form. How to care for the garden without disturbing the creatures we want to conserve?

* *Learn about the Nokomis Naturescape and volunteer opportunities at:*
Nokomis East Neighborhood Association nokomiseast.org
Minneapolis Parks and Recreation Board minneapolisparks.org
Wild Ones Twin Cities wildonestwincities.org

Do a Garden Study

Get outside and enjoy an investigative stroll. What plants are showing signs of life? Are blooming? See any early pollinators? Consider what plants to add and wildlife to invite. How has your garden environment changed from last year and what adjustments would improve pollinator habitat? A deliberate study can help you consider habitat priorities before diving into a spring clean-up that could clean-out many beneficial insects with their shelters.

Protect Pollinator Homes

One way to develop a habitat point-of-view, is to consider the following elements on your grounds as potential homes for unseen beings since they very well may be. With this in mind, modify your garden care actions. Step away from the habit of blowing, raking, clipping and bagging all that valuable biomass, that is then hauled away, diminishing important insect populations in the process.

Plant Stems: Many helpful insects including tiny native bees, pest-eating predators like lacewings and syrphid flies, overwinter in hollow plant stems. **CARE:** 1. Avoid cutting down plant stems too early in spring. 2. When cutting back, leave at least 15" of stem and let that remain up over the growing season for insect cavity dwellings the following year. 3. Cut stems may be strewn on the ground to double as mulch and insect havens. 4. Another solution is to bundle, tie and hang horizontally, a few dozen of the stems to serve as homes for native cavity dwelling bees.

Leaf Litter: The leaf litter is a wintering nest for many beneficial adult insects, as well, as eggs and pupae. Some adult butterflies, such as mourning cloak, question marks, and commas hibernate in the leafy beds. **CARE:** 1. Wait until temperatures warm to remove leaves from perennial gardens (to at least a steady string of 50 degree days). 2. Leave at least a layer to act as moisture-retaining mulch while adding soil nutrition and fiber.

Soil: A variety of insects overwinter in soil burrows in either adult, egg or pupae form, including hummingbird clearwing moths and many native bees. **CARE:** 1. Keep the soil uncovered and do not mulch especially with a thick wood chip layer (or plastic). 2. Wait to mulch until weather warms and soil is drier. 3. Try to maintain some open soil areas in your yard or garden.

Woody Perennials: A variety of butterflies and moths overwinter as cocoons and chrysalises suspended on branches. **CARE:** Keep a look out for cocoons and chrysalises as you prune. Leave the occupied branch be or place cut branch in a safe place to emerge.

These simple actions add up from garden to garden, making a significant difference towards healthier pollinator populations.