

Leave Your Fallen Leaves for the Bees, Please

By Cindy Murray



One day last Fall, my neighbor was standing on our street gazing at my front yard, so I went over to say hello. Looking concerned, she said somewhat sheepishly, “Looks like the leaves from my trees have blown onto your property.” I replied, “Yes, and that’s a good thing, because over the winter they’ll decompose and nurture the soil.” I had a lot more to say on the subject, but I didn’t want to “info-dump” (as my son claims I have a tendency to do), so I let it go at that.

Now, at the risk of “info-dumping” on my readers, I’d like to expound a bit on the rewards you, your landscaping, and even the ecosystem

receives by allowing your fallen leaves to stay on the ground for the duration of fall and winter.

Pollinator Havens



While a winter landscape may appear dreary, even lifeless, we are well-aware that numerous plants and grasses, along with the majority of trees, are merely dormant or have slowed down their metabolic processes. But what is not apparent are the tiny niches among dead plant material--fallen leaves, for example—that are thriving with life, some actively, others in states of dormancy. What's more, these are key components in the web of life on earth. Take for instance pollinators. It is well-known that Monarch butterflies migrate to Mexico for the winter, but most Northern Arizona butterfly species remain here, in a dormant state, either as an egg, caterpillar, pupae (chrysalis), or adult.

Our resident western square-dotted butterfly finds refuge in its chrysalis under leaf litter or in sand, while the dusky wing caterpillar fashions a bedroll, implementing silk to wrap itself in a leaf. Adult mourning cloak butterflies snuggle down under leaves, and during warm winter and spring days, may take brief foraging flights. This is why the mourning cloak is typically the first butterfly we spy at the break of spring. The ornate western polyphemus moth overwinters in a silken cocoon underground, either attached to plant matter or beneath fallen leaves.



In late summer, newly-mated queen bumble bees scout for winter hibernation sanctuaries, literally taking cover in soils topped with leaf litter. Among those in our region are the medium-sized brilliant yellow, orange and black-banded Hunt's bumblebee, which you'll spy during the growing season foraging on native plants like rabbitbrush, penstemons, currants, and yarrow. The robust, seemingly gravity-defiant Nevada bumblebee also resides here, sporting a furry, gold- and black-banded abdomen with a golden thorax centered with a gleaming black spot. Both of these bumblebees are efficient buzz-pollinators on several food crops, including tomatoes.

Wildlife and Soil-Builder Habitat

A profusion of critters, such as mice, beetle grubs, spiders, snakes, and amphibians seek warm havens beneath the leaves. Throughout the cold season, soil builders, namely earthworms, millipedes, centipedes, sow bugs, fungi, and bacteria, actively take part in the processes of decomposition, releasing nutrients vital to plant growth into the soil.

Moderating Temperature Extremes

Layers of leaf litter may do wonders in moderating severe temperature swings common to Northern Arizona in winters and early spring that could otherwise injure cold-hardy underground vegetables like carrots and beets, or ornamental perennials and shrubs.

There are other windfalls you, your garden, and the environment may gain by giving your rake a break this fall. These include an increase in soil moisture retention, creation of effective weed barriers, and a reduction in landfill waste.

As in any science-based endeavor, we must be cognizant of exceptions to the rule of “leave your leaves be.” For one, lawns could smother under thick layers of leaves; they do however, profit from a thin layer, which as the leaves decompose, will provide fertilizer in the early days of spring. Also be aware that during late spring freezes, fruit trees fare better on moist, bare ground, which will radiate heat upwards towards tender fruit blossoms, especially when frost covers reach all the way to the ground.

I regard Autumn’s fallen leaves as the season’s finest and most fruitful crop. When you think about it, we all work diligently throughout summer tending to our landscaping, our pollinators, and our feathered friends, so why not take a breather during Fall and Winter to let Mother Nature work her magic?