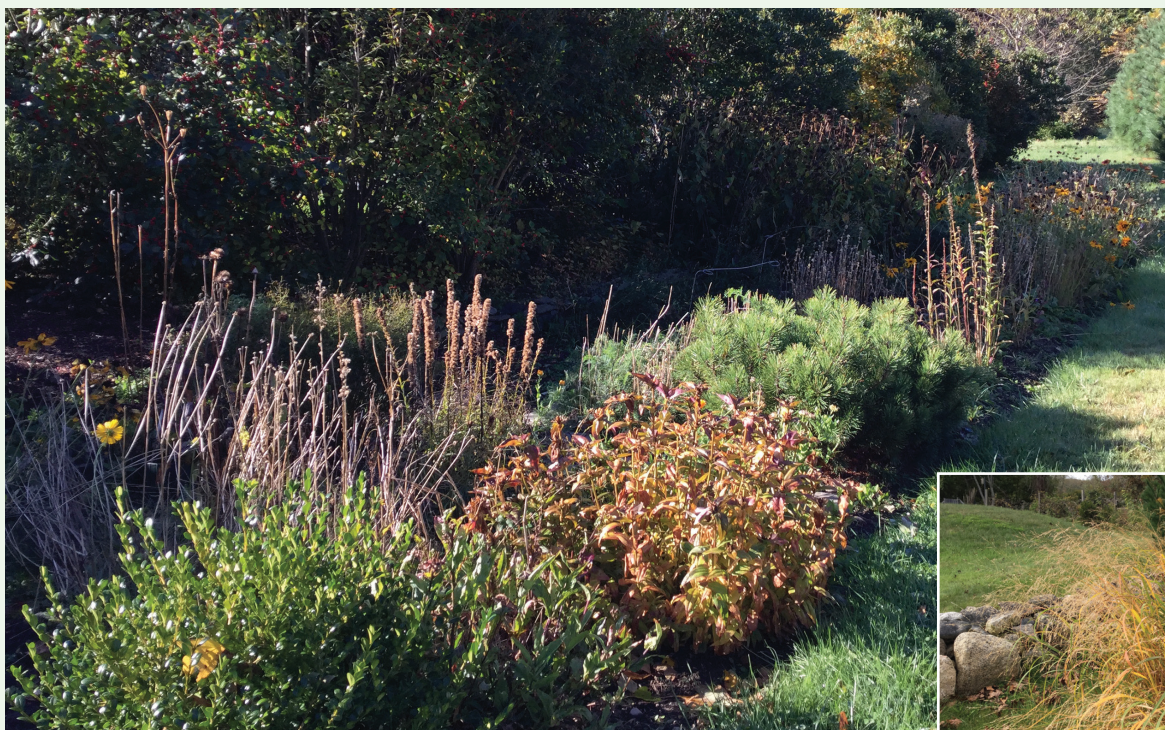


To Deadhead or Not



Switch panicgrass provides winter interest in the landscape.

Many gardeners like a tidy, pretty, and colorful garden to enjoy and share with others. All wilted petals and punctured leaves are pinched off and plants with faded blossoms deadheaded. Stems are cut to the ground. Leaves are raked or blown away.

However, keeping a tidy garden is not the best way to maintain native plants, attract their pollinators, and provide an environment for other beneficial wild creatures. Consider the following alternative ways to care for your garden at the end of summer.

Let your plants produce their own seeds. For example, as a propagator of native plants, I need fresh seed every year to grow perennials for several organizations. As flowers wilt and start to produce seeds, I watch for the stems and seedheads to turn brown. I pour the seeds into glass jars to save until the correct time to start them growing. My collecting year begins around July 1 with red columbine (*Aquilegia canadensis*) and ends when New England American-aster (*Symphyotrichum novae-angliae*) finally produces mature seeds, sometimes after the first frost. Meanwhile my garden looks a little ragged with brown seedheads and stalks mixing with late flowering perennials.

Preserve your favorite plants by letting some seeds return to the earth. Red columbine, for example, has a three- to five-year life span. If you deadhead or remove all the seeds, the plants eventually will die out. When collecting seeds, I purposely drop seeds where I want new seedlings.

Support the birds by not cleaning up your garden.

A garden with ripe seedheads provides a great place for native birds to hunt for their favorite food. These native seeds are better than a commercial seed mix produced in another part of the country. Yellow-rumped warblers gorge on small bayberry (*Morella caroliniensis*) seeds before they make their long journey south. American goldfinches hang upside down as they pick out barely ripe seeds. Later in the season birds peck in the soil for seeds whenever the ground is free of snow. I have found that scattering seeds in the fall rather than saving them does not work well in this region. The seeds are often consumed long before they have a chance to germinate.

Attract native bees by having an unkempt garden. Mason bees are generalist foragers that gather pollen from many types of flowers and store it in the hollow stems of plants, such as red elderberry (*Sambucus racemosa*) or swamp milkweed (*Asclepias incarnata*). They lay their eggs in the stems and use mud or “masonry” to seal in the eggs and pollen, so having some mud around your yard is a good thing.

Leaf cutter bees are great pollinators of wildflowers, fruits, vegetables, and other crops. They use the leaves to construct nests in cavities in stone walls or in rotting wood, so don't be

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too upset when you find holes in the leaves of your flowers. The plants will survive, and you will be ensuring that your perennials will be pollinated.

Provide winter cover for non-migratory butterflies. Most people know about monarch butterflies that fly south in the fall. However, other butterflies overwinter locally by finding shelter somewhere dry and safe. They use leaf litter, holes in rock walls, or crevices under tree bark until spring. Because their numbers are declining, it is important to protect their nesting and wintering sites.

After a winter snowfall, enjoy the amazing visual effect of standing grasses or the tall stems of flowers with seedheads. Snow can stack up like cotton balls on eastern purple coneflower (*Echinacea purpurea*) while the stems sway in the wind. When the ground is covered with snow some birds have figured out how to ride the grass stems of little bluestem (*Schizachyrium scoparium*) to the ground and then eat the seeds that fall off. These scenes will remind you of what your garden produced last summer and what you can add at the next growing season.

Deciding which native perennials to grow is easy, considering the many natives that grow in our region. Early bloomers and spring ephemerals fade away by midsummer. Perennials that have a longer standing time are the midsummer to fall plants such as purple Joe-Pye weed (*Eutrochium purpureum*), fall sneezeweed (*Helenium autumnale*), foxglove beardtongue (*Penstemon digitalis*), cardinal-flower (*Lobelia cardinalis*), smooth American-aster (*Symphotrichum laeve*), and many of the other asters.

Consider trimming back grasses in early spring just after the new green leaves appear rather than in the fall. Choose grasses that stand tall in the fall and winter. Both little and big bluestem remain upright throughout most of the winter. Bees winter at their base. Switch panicgrass (*Panicum virgatum*) turns a light brown, and the leaves have a pleasing curl. You can also use grasses in flower arrangements.



Sculptural shapes formed by seedheads of wild lupine in the winter garden

So when you are tempted to “clean up” your drooping, spent flowers, dried leaves, or old woody clippings, pause and consider the benefits to the birds, butterflies, and bees. Look beyond the ragged edges and be content, knowing that you are supporting the survival of many of our native species.

The Native Plant Trust states, “The ultimate goal of the ecological gardener is a beautiful garden that provides year-round interest, supports local wildlife, absorbs and filters rainwater, and improves air quality.”



Cardinal flower stalks will continue shedding their seeds through the fall if left standing.

References:

<https://gobotany.nativeplanttrust.org>

<http://www.savvygardening.com>