



Leave the Leaves

Fall Cleanup – Wildlife Style

October 16, 2025

Kristyna Culp

Director, Habitat Builders

info@habitatbuilders.org



Fall Clean Up

The short answer is
DO NOTHING

- Inaction
 - Provides Habitat: Food, Shelter, Cover
 - Improves Soil
 - Saves Money and Time
 - Decreases Pollution



Do you like....

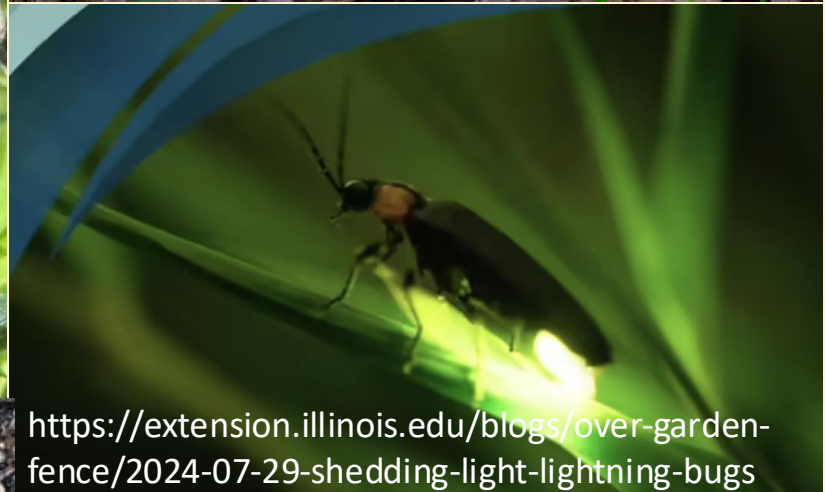




https://auth1.dpr.ncparks.gov/moths/view.php?MONA_number=7746.00



Photo: Sebastian Alejandro Echeverri



<https://extension.illinois.edu/blogs/over-garden-fence/2024-07-29-shedding-light-lightning-bugs>

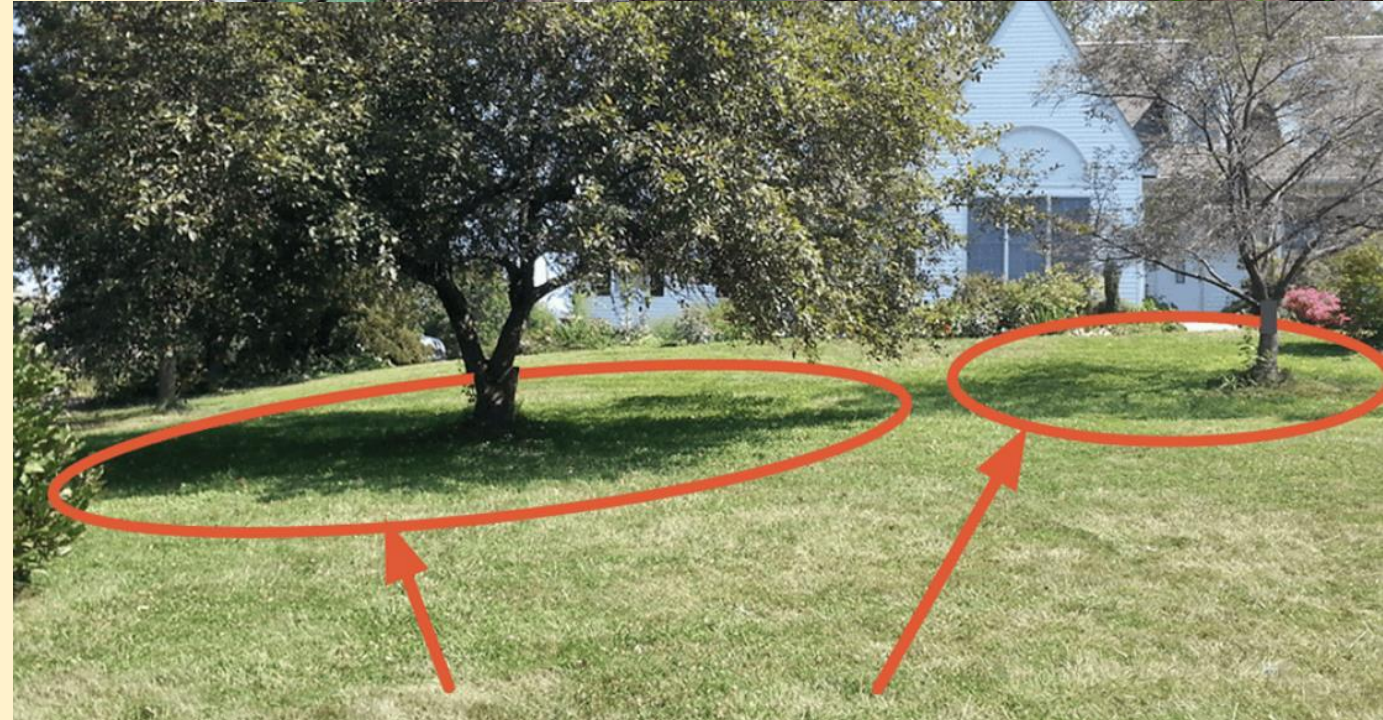


Photo: D.J. Weyer CC-BY-NC

Leave the Leaves

See Resources
for more

- Provides Wildlife Habitat¹
 - Luna Moth, Io Moth, Swallowtail chrysalises
 - Lightning bug larvae
 - Eastern Box Turtle shelter
 - Macro/micro-organisms feed on dead leaves
- Rake don't mow
- Leaves are Great Mulch
 - Increases organic matter
 - Cheap (Free)
 - Controls weeds



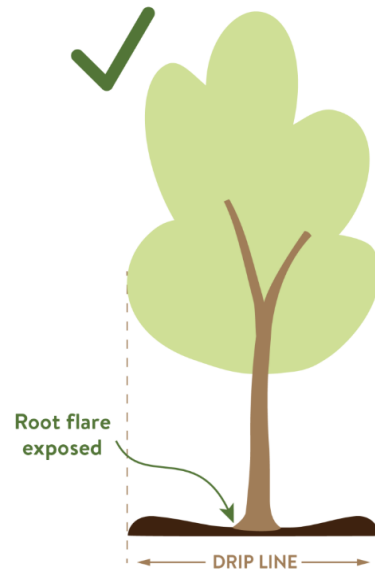
<https://www.nwf.org/leavetheleaves>

Leaves and Trees

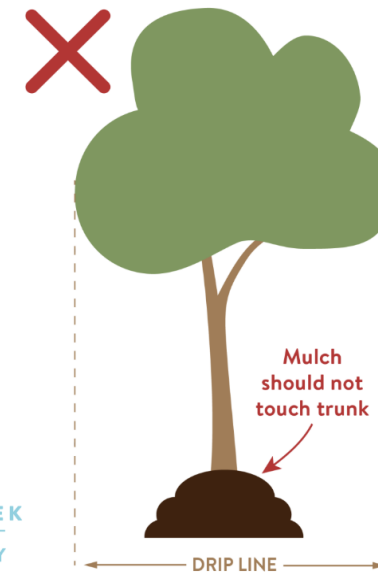
- Drip Line
- Root Flare
- NO MULCH VOLCANOES!
- Leaves are the obvious tree mulch
- Protects trunk from mower
- Tree Islands



PROPER MULCHING



NO MULCH VOLCANO!



OAKCREEK
WISCONSIN
FORESTRY



Reduce the Lawn

- Turfgrass is not happy in Piedmont NC
- Decrease the lawn and add wildlife support plants
- Save money and time on lawn maintenance⁶
 - 40 million acres of turf grass in US
 - 9,000,000,000 gallons of water per day
- Pollution from Lawn Equipment⁵
 - 30min gas blower/trimmer=3900mi (Raptor)

https://www.bybrittanygoldwyn.com/front-lawn-conversion/?srsId=AfmBOoqJpK6Ti30aWFdH8_Ezhd4adkh_lw9x7JccsKc8nUU9dwcl4KWB



Save the Stems⁴

- Stems are Insect Nurseries
- Seed heads are Bird Restaurants
- Plants are shelter for wildlife
- Cut back stems to 8"-24" in the Spring



How to Create Habitat for Stem-Nesting Bees

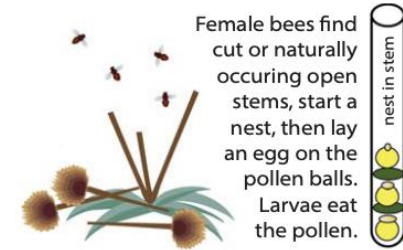


WINTER

Leave dead flower stalks intact over the winter

SPRING

Cut back dead flower stalks leaving stem stubble of varying height, 8 to 24 inches, to provide nest cavities.



SUMMER

New growth of the perennial hides the stem stubble.



FALL



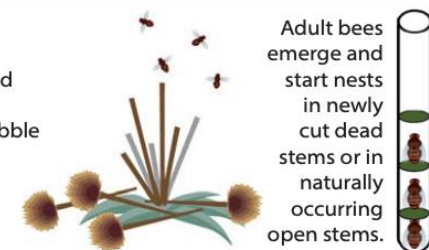
WINTER



Bees hibernate in stems during the winter

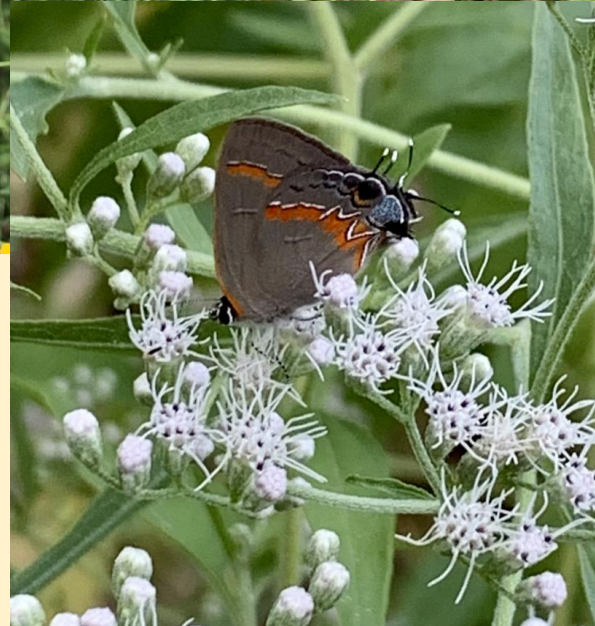
SPRING

Cut back dead flower stalks. Old stem stubble will naturally decompose.



Exceptions

- Aggressive plants
- Diseased plants
- Invasives



Build a Compost Bin⁹

10' of 4' fencing

+Lots of leaves

+Water

+Kitchen scraps

+Time

= Compost

15% of waste stream is compostable food

>30% of waste stream is compostable



Plant Perennials

- Trees
- Shrubs
- Most perennials
- Focus on root growth
- Requires less water and attention (than Spring planting)
- Mark them so you can BOLO in the Spring
- Don't disturb ground nesting bees





Plant Late Bloomers



Plant Late Bloomers

- *Conoclinium coelestinum*, Blue Mist Flower
- *Symphyotrichum*
 - *S. georgianum*, Georgia Aster
 - *S. novae-angliae*, NY Aster
 - *S. oblongifolium*, Aromatic Aster
 - *S. ericoides*, Heath Aster
 - *S. pilosum* Old Field Aster (tall)
- *Solidago*, Goldenrod
 - *Solidago altissima* (aggressive and big)
 - *Solidago speciosa*
 - *Solidago nemoralis*



Redesign the Garden

- Reduce the lawn
- Add leaf mulch
- Add plants
- Consider pathways
- Divide, group or move plants



Feed the Birds

- Seedheads
- Plants with berries
- Feeders



Water the Wildlife

- Always provide water sources
- Various depths and locations
- Keep water moving while nights are >50 degrees

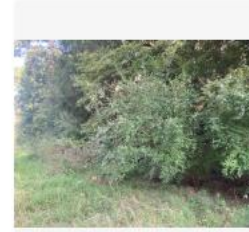


Remove Invasives¹⁰

- Privet, English Ivy, Autumn/Thorny Olive, Wisteria still for sale
- Bradford Pear
- Join our Habitat Builders IPR workshops to learn more



Autumn Olive
Elaeagnus umbellata



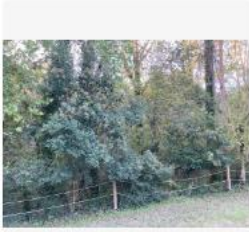
Bittersweet
Celastrus orbiculatus



Bradford Pear
Pyrus calleryana



Chinese Privet
Ligustrum sinense



Chinese Wisteria
Wisteria sinensis



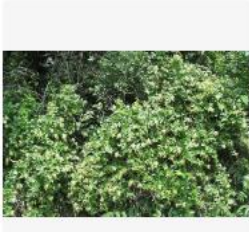
Clematis
Clematis terniflora



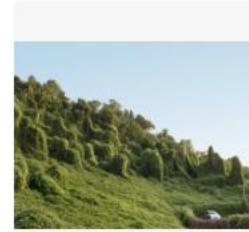
English Ivy
Hedera helix var. *helix*



Japanese Honeysuckle
Lonicera japonica



Kudzu
Pueraria montana var. *lobata*



Mimosa
Albizia julibrissin



Multiflora Rose
Rosa multiflora



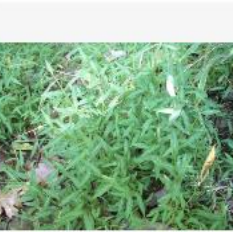
Paper Mulberry
Broussonetia papyrifera



Princess Tree
Paulownia tomentosa



Stilt Grass
Microstegium vimineum



Thorny Olive
Elaeagnus pungens



Tree of Heaven
Ailanthus altissima



Resources

1. [NWF: Leave the Leaves](#)
2. [NWF: How Fallen Leaves Support Moths and Butterflies](#)
3. [Xerces: Leave the Leaves](#)
4. [Xerces: Save the Stems](#)
5. [Edmunds: Lawn Equipment Pollution](#)
6. [NWF: Reduce the Lawn](#)
7. [HGNP: Shrink Your Lawn](#)
8. [Brittany Goldwin Reduces the Lawn](#)
9. [Compost Bin Video](#)
10. [NC Invasive Plant Council](#)
11. [Habitat Builders website](#)





Questions?
Contact at
kc@kristynaculp.com
info@habitatbuilders.org

