

Leaving the Autumn Leaves and Twigs

By Greg Sykes (greg@grsykes.com)



Autumn is around the corner and that means raking up every last leaf and clearing dead plant material from the yard—or does it? The left image (A) was photographed early last December, so tree leaves already fell and most of the plants entered dormancy except for several green holdouts. Take a closer look at this Virginia native plant garden (B) and find a swallowtail butterfly's chrysalis attached to the dried stem of a white wood aster (*Eurybia divaricata*)! While the aster did not host and feed this caterpillar, it provides critical habitat during the insect's pupa stage. Many caterpillars develop on a given plant species and then, to avoid predators looking amongst plants where they know prey live, move to a different location to pupate. This caterpillar likely spent the late summer developing on the nearby tulip poplar (*Liriodendron tulipifera*) and descended to overwinter as a pupa.

To help this maturing butterfly, fireflies, and other hibernating critters emerge or their eggs hatch next spring, the best and wisest practice is to leave the husks and fallen foliage where they lie outside. Raking, blowing, or otherwise wiping out and bagging leaf litter means killing the animals sheltering within those leaves. When hibernating insects are mistakenly brought indoors for “safe keeping,” they end up in a warm environment that confuses their cycles, prompting an early emergence when the temperatures are too cold to survive outside and no food sources or mates are available. People might be concerned that some insect pests remain in the debris mix. So will many more predatory insects, spiders, and other beneficial organisms to keep the unwanted bugs at bay. Saving dried, hollow stems offer homes to mason bees—a way to help pollinators without using blossoms. Added bonuses to leaving the leaves are:

- less yard work chores (or paying someone to do them)
- the saved stalks and twigs hold the leaves in place, preventing them from blowing about, and
- when the plant matter eventually decomposes, it provides the best compost—far better than wood-based mulch.

Skipping the synthetic yard chemicals is healthier for both wildlife and soil microbes. Some plants need trimming, such as low-hanging branches and vegetation flopping across sidewalks. Consider scattering

those bits around the yard, adding them to your compost pile, or lastly, sending them off for recycling. Never dump yard debris in natural areas including parkland (see [Jewell 2009](#) in the References section). Healthy land stewardship is easy, helps gardens, and encourages butterflies and other beautiful creatures to flourish next year.

References:

Jewell, Susan. 2009. That pesky yard waste: it's biodegradable, so why can't I just dump it in the woods? *The Fairfax Chronicle* 7(2):4. Reprinted with permission at http://www.grsykes.com/pdf/jewell-yard_waste.pdf.
<https://xerces.org/blog/leave-the-leaves>
<https://www.nwf.org/Magazines/National-Wildlife/2015/OctNov/Gardening/Leave-the-Leaves>
<https://piedmontmastergardeners.org/leave-the-leaves/>

* * * * *