

The chores are almost done for the year as the season winds down. Take time to ponder your successes and failures, catch up on your garden reading, order books you've been meaning to read, make lists and notes, label photos from the garden, and plan for next year. In the words of John Whiting, "The home gardener is part scientist, part artist, part philosopher, part ploughman." Use this time to ponder your role, do some homework, and look forward to another season.

This Month in the Garden

by Peggy Koppmann

Microbe Munchies – Now is the time to finish placing compost on your vegetable garden. Think of compost as food for all those microbes that populate your soil. They are the "little guys", (bacteria, fungi, nematodes, protozoa) who break down organic material and deliver it to plants in a form they can actually use. They are the heavy lifters in soil health. Want to learn more? Check out *Teeming with Microbes* by Jeff Lowenfels & Wayne Lewis. It will change the way you look at soil.

To Tidy or Not to Tidy – If you are of the leave 'em standing school of thought (perennials, that is), fennel, miscanthus, verbena and teasel make good hibernation sites for many species of butterflies.

"A swallowtail butterfly will seek shelter as a caterpillar in a fallen, curled leaf while the viceroy butterfly will overwinter as an adult nestled in leaf litter or under tree bark." The article, *Why NOT to cut our perennials this fall*, in web.extension.illinois.edu suggests a compromise in the cleanup department to "create aesthetic appeal and support beneficial wildlife". (Thanks to Phyllis Lobbins for this info.)


Mulch Masters – Find that sweet spot for mulching before the ground freezes and not providing critters a nice, snug hiding place too soon. Think of mulch as a winter blanket, as snow cover is unreliable; we learned that last year. Tender plants such welcome a mulch cover, but stay away

from mulching Heuchera, Delphiniums, poppies, iris, violas, and sedums as the mulch can compact the crowns and promote rotting. Keep mulch pulled back several inches from the base of fruit trees to prevent injury from hungry critters. Mulch strawberries loosely with straw after we have had several nights with temps in the 20's. Don't wait until the temperature drops into the teens

Last of the Leaves – Use the last of the season's leaves as a natural mulch to enrich soil, conserve moisture, and protect plants changes in soil temperature. Shred leaves with a mulching mower or shredder. Be careful though; thicker is not necessarily better as too thick a layer of leaves can hold too much moisture, leading to rot or fungal diseases.

Protection Plan – Dan Pearson at *The Guardian* suggests cutting back roses and buddleia by "a third to prevent wind-rock which can undermine stability". Those winter winds can weaken the root system of roses. Just remember to cut stems just above an outward-facing leaf system. Jackson & Perkins advises that hybrid teas and floribundas receive a 6" mound of soil, covered with mulch or straw. "Cover the base of your (climbing roses) with soil. Tie the canes and wrap them in burlap. For severe-winter areas, anchor the canes to the ground and cover them with straw."

And then... Reduce or stop fertilizing houseplants and give them as much

light as possible. Set up bird feeders and water sources. Put our suet feeders to keep the birds active and patrolling for any remaining insects in your garden. Finish planting bulbs and pot up some for indoor forcing. Keep watering trees and shrubs as long as the water drains into the soil freely. Dig a hole for a living Christmas tree if you plan to have one. Clean and oil garden tools and store hoses. Store sand for traction in winter sidewalks. 



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