

## **Pollinator-Friendly Spring Cleanup**

by Lynn Sparks

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A neat, weed-free garden is a thing of beauty in the eye of the beholder. But did you ever stop and think how an insect, especially a valuable pollinator, might see the same landscape? The majority of insects are beneficial to us. Even those we dislike, whose larvae may feed on our vegetables, provide much-needed food for baby songbirds ( who dine mostly on soft-bodied insects).

Many insects overwinter in debris on the ground. This may be old mulch, dead leaves, or fallen plant stems that accumulated near the plants they fed on as larvae. That rolled up dead leaf looks trashy to you, but there may be a butterfly cocoon inside it. Wait until daytime temperatures average 50 degrees to clean up this debris; many of the insects will have hatched by then.

Other insects, including the very important native bees, tend to nest in the ground itself. Many will choose bare soil; these solitary ground-nesters make up 70% of our native bees in Ohio and are often active in early spring. Try to leave an area of undisturbed (ie untilled) soil in your yard for these bees.

Some insects nest in hollow stems. Leaving these stems standing in place through the winter allows the overwintering insect to safely survive freezing temperatures. When these stems are cut down and chopped or burned, the insects inside are killed. If you need to prune them, stack them in a corner of the garden intact until the weather warms up. Making a brush pile in an out-of-the-way corner will be beneficial to other wildlife too.

Many bees, including everyone's favorite food pollinator, the honey bee, need early spring blooms to provide nectar and pollen for their young. Honeybees need these blossoms early in the spring so they can build up a large enough colony to handle their pollination duties. Early blooming "weeds"—chickweed, dandelion, purple deadnettle, and clover among them—are very important food sources. If you have a space to do so, leave these plants blooming so that they can be used by pollinators when there isn't much else for them to eat. You can always clear that garden bed a few weeks later when there are other blooms for the bees to feed on.

Many lawns are treated for various weeds early in the spring. Some of these pesticides do not directly affect bees and other insects, but in general, avoid spraying anything on a lawn with blooming weeds in it. Bees and other insects are attracted to these weeds and may be affected by the spray. Always follow label directions closely, and consider mowing the area before application so that there are fewer blooms to attract the insects that might be harmed. Developing a tolerance for some of these "weeds" in your lawn can make a big difference to a bee.

So, clean up and prepare your yard for spring planting—but think safety for pollinators while you're doing it. Without insects, humans couldn't exist either.