Protecting Overwintering Beneficial Insects

By Virgene Link
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Falling leaves and falling temperatures - no wonder this time of year is so appropriately named! It is time to prepare your garden/yard for winter. Does this mean cleaning it up entirely? No, please don't!

As you prepare your garden for fall and winter, remember to leave some plant material to feed and shelter beneficial insects. Even small amounts of seeds and brush will help beneficial insects survive the cold, wet months. The beneficial insects will thank you – and so will your garden.

LEAVES: Rake and dispose of leaves from fruit trees, especially if they have scab or other fungus growing on the fruit. Rarely does home compost get hot enough to kill the fungus spores, so burn diseased leaves (if it is legal in your area) or send them to a yard waste facility. Large commercial compost piles are managed so they reach optimal temperatures for killing spores. Rake and compost other leaves, as those from maple trees. They make good cover on flowerbeds to suppress winter annuals like shotweed (aka bittercress).

Leaf litter is mulch that provides hiding places and food for your beneficial insects including ground beetles, centipedes, millipedes, pill bugs and spiders. These helpful creatures will break down and add organics to your soil.

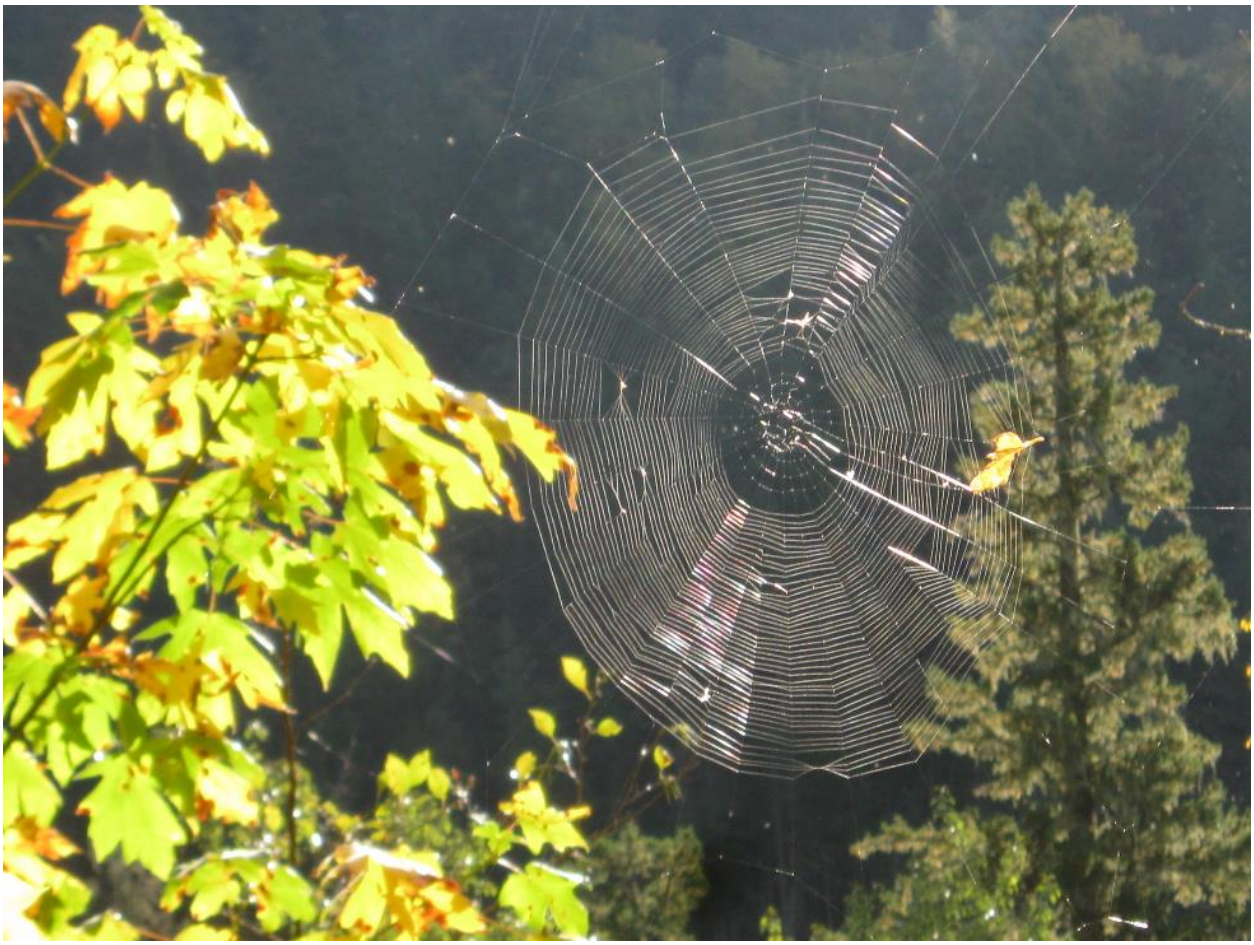
PLANTS AND SEEDS: Leave healthy standing plants with their seeds to provide birds with winter foraging. Have too many? Make a pile of brush or two for hiding places. Your overwintering queen bumblebees and wasps need a warmer place to get out of the coming winter weather. Wait until spring to trim those ornamental grasses. That little haystack may be just the place she has chosen to burrow.

BARE AREA: Your lot should have a relatively undisturbed place with food, water and shelter for our wildlife. A few rocks, pieces of wood and even some bare soil in protected areas provide hiding places. The queens of some of our native bees nest underground in abandoned holes – the worker bees die off and so do not overwinter.

LAWN: Dried mown grass from your lawn clippings also makes a great hiding place for beneficial insects. Pile it in your waste area or at the back of a garden bed. The grass will compost over the winter to be mixed with other "leavings" for your beds in the spring. However DON'T keep it if you have used Weed and Feed on your lawn. The herbicide (aka weed killer) portion may take a while to break down.

One by-product of 2,4-D production (the herbicide in Weed and Feed) is dioxin. It may only be a small amount, but with our rainy climate, it can easily end up in Puget Sound. It is toxic to fish and mildly toxic to Dungeness crab**.** Dioxin has been found in ground water in five states, and is present in surface water throughout the U.S. Golfers, see Info Box to learn what dioxin may be doing to your liver!

Your best lawn fertilizer is a mulching lawn mower, which chops up grass clippings and returns it to feed and mulch your lawn. Before heading into winter, set your blade a little higher for your last mowing. Tolerate a few dandelions or some clover. Bees and parasitic wasps love the nectar. After building a nest and raising a family, a wasp needs a brush or grass pile for winter shelter. Garden spiders catch mosquitoes and other harmful insects. Keep them around by providing safe hiding places for their egg sacks.



An orb weaver spider's web. Spiders are the best predators in our homes or gardens. Please protect their egg cases. *Photo by Virgene Link / WSU Skagit County Master Gardener*

NO WASP TRAPS: Sparkling, colorful traps lure wasps and other beneficial insects in from your garden, depriving you of the benefits of their labors. Wasps are beneficial insects. They prey on insect larvae and adults, and they pollinate flowers. If you watch, you can see wasps landing on leaves, then searching under them, looking for insect eggs, aphids, spiders or

caterpillars to ambush. If you miss having a colorful wasp trap in your yard, buy a glass ball or other ornament. When you kill a beneficial insect, you inherit its work!
If wasps are by your door, or you are highly allergic to their sting, you have cause for concern. You may need to take selective action by removing them from your personal space, or use another door until they are gone for the winter.

After frost is also a good time to remove those empty wasp or hornet nests. Most times you don't even know the nests are there, until the leaves fall or the wind blows them down. The queen is hiding somewhere else waiting for spring. Take care of them—we want them back!

NO BUG "ZAPPERS": Don't use those bug "zappers." They lure night flying insects to their light and incinerate them. The zappers are indiscriminate killers, depleting our precious pollinator population. They also deprive our birds and bats of an important food source.

WINTER GREENERY and NECTAR: Enhance your garden with native plants for winter greenery, fall colors and early spring flowers. Salal, Oregon grape and vine maple are popular additions. Hellebores like Lenten rose, sage, and heathers also stay green all winter. They provide late winter flowers for your garden's beauty, and nectar for birds and insects.

Try to have a variety of plants that sequentially flower over many months, so our bumblebees, wasps and Anna's hummingbirds can find some "real" nectar if they come out on a warm winter's day. And planting cover crops, like crimson clover or Austrian field peas, provides insect habitat while protecting and feeding your garden soil.

Don't do too good of a job cleaning your garden or yard this fall. Leave plant material and grass piles for good insects to hide in.

Left: A queen bald-faced hornet fuels up on a fennel in anticipation of winter. Hornets are important predators on our trees and flowers. **Right:** A rufous bumblebee excavating a hole. Queen bumblebees will nest in an old mouse hole, a hole in a stump, or in dry thatch. *Photos by Virgene Llink / WSU Skagit County Master Gardeners.*

Golfers Beware
A 65 year old man had acute hepatitis, thought to be caused by exposure to 2,4-D. The patient ingested 2,4-D as a result of habitual licking of his golf ball. Clinical and histological data together with a challenge test confirmed the diagnosis of "golf ball liver". - From the medical journal, *Gut*, an international *journal* of gastroenterology.
www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/9203952

RESOURCES:

- Celebrating Wildflowers: Wasp Pollination. U.S. Forest Service https://www.fs.fed.us/wildflowers/pollinators/animals/wasps.shtml

- Yellowjackets and Paper Wasps. Peter J. Landolt and Arthur L. Antonelli, WSU Cooperative Extension, https://s3.wp.wsu.edu/uploads/sites/1384/2016/07/Yellowjackets-and-Paper-Wasps.pdf

- Beneficial Insects in the Home Garden, Oregon State University, https://extension.oregonstate.edu/sites/default/files/documents/12281/beneficialinsects.pdf

- *Be a Beneficial Gardener – Support Your Local Insects!* WSU Clark County Extension, https://s3.wp.wsu.edu/uploads/sites/2079/2014/02/Beneficial.pdf

Note: some hyperlinks in this article have been updated since its initial publication.