



NEWSPAPER ARTICLES

Please Leave the Leaves! (December 5, 2020)

by *Kate Mackey, UCCE Master Gardener*

Fall is here and falling leaves "littering" the yards. Homeowners trim back bushes and plants and rake up the leaves for a nice clean look to the yard. Then the leaves go into the yard waste bin for trash pick-up day. As gardeners and homeowners, we take pride in our neat and tidy yards, but consider this--fallen leaves are not necessarily a bad thing.

With the insects of the summer like butterflies, bees, and other beneficial bugs gone from sight, you may think they have migrated, but most are overwintering in your yard and need a place to be safe and dry. Fallen leaves can provide a perfect habitat. This does not mean that you have to give your yard over to the invertebrate world and have it look like a wilderness!



It doesn't mean getting in trouble with the local homeowner's association for a messy yard, or with your relatives who like a nice tidy lawn for kids to play. It means taking a portion of your yard to create a habitat for your spineless friends so that they can overwinter and return in the spring ready to do their job of pollinating, protecting through predation on pests, and providing entertainment through their color and movement in your environment.

As Scott Hoffman Black of the Xerces Society says: "Many of our native solitary bees have laid eggs and provisioned nests in soil or in standing dead trees or hollowed out branches where the young are pupating. Many species rely on fallen leaves for cover and to insulate them from the elements. There are so many animals that live in leaves--spiders, snails, worms, beetles, millipedes, mites, and more—that support the chipmunks, turtles, birds, and amphibians that rely on these insects for food."

Remember that not all insects are bad for our gardens. There are many beneficial insects that pollinate our vegetables and flowers. Spiders, ladybugs, lacewings and their ilk predate on aphids, whiteflies, thrips, and other "bad bugs" that harm our plants. A healthy landscape should be full of insects, with the good bugs keeping the destructive pests in balance.

So, pick out an area of your yard to keep a weed pile or a thin layer of debris. In your planting beds, spread the leaves and raked-up twigs into that area. This will provide mulch for your beds and suppress weeds--along with the benefit of promoting a winter habitat for beneficial insects. The cover will also promote worms that are beneficial to the soil as aerators, plus their castings provide a natural fertilizer. You can even leave a thin layer of leaves on your lawn but beware that too thick of a layer could kill the lawn.

For more information on this important issue in environmental protection, please visit the Xerces.org website. The goal of the non-profit, international Xerces Society is the protection of the natural world through conservation efforts for the invertebrate species. Invertebrate animals are animals with without a spine such as insects, spiders, worms, and mollusks.

Also, you can contact your local Master Gardener program in your county or the University of California's Agricultural and Natural Resources website (ipm.ucanr.edu). There are many great articles on science-based information on Integrated Pest Management and other horticultural issues.

In the meantime, don't forget to "Leave the Leaves!" Happy Fall!

Contact the Master Gardeners in Tulare County: (559) 684-3325; Kings County at (559) 852-2736

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