

THE CASE FOR A MESSY FALL GARDEN... should it stay or should it go?

by Laura Walker

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One of the first individuals I thought would have both opinion and scientific knowledge on this subject was **Russel Barsh, the founder and Director of Kwiáht**, an organization 'uniquely situated to help islanders find a healthy balance between people, plants and wildlife'. Fortunate for the Garden Club, Russel is a frequent contributor to our newsletter and has presented at many programs in the past. He had four very specific wildlife concerns to share over the 'clean-up' of the garden at this time of year.

"One concern is the rare Propertius Duskywing butterfly, which only feeds on Garry oaks in our area. The caterpillar rolls itself up in an oak leaf in late summer; the leaf eventually falls, and the caterpillars' cocoons lay in the oak leaf litter until late spring when they emerge as butterflies. Probably fewer than a thousand of these butterflies are now found in the islands; there used to be several hundred at Mount Young but "restoration" efforts there decimated the population, and in the last few years I've only seen a few dozen. It's essential that homeowners leave oak leaf litter undisturbed until summer."

"Overall, leaving some undisturbed brushy patches around a garden is crucial for native bees that spent the summer making and provisioning tunnel-like areas in the ground, inside the canes of Rubus species (berries), and in beetle boreholes in living trees and snags. A super tidy garden is a garden without a resident pollinator community that is ready to emerge and go to work in the spring. Bumblebees are especially important in our area, and they love to nest under boulders, in rock piles, and under logs." (In my garden I built low rock terrace walls, and they are full of bee nests; I discovered they also attract shrews to nest -- shrews are unsung heroes of local gardens that spend all year feasting on slugs, snails, beetles and grubs.)

"Leaving some garden vegetables and flowers to go to seed in fall is not only a gift to the birds, but can help attract and feed another important group of pollinators: flower flies (hoverflies in UK English). In temperate regions, these flies account for about half of the pollination -- and they are more active than bees in early spring when the weather is too wet and windy for bees; as well as late summer to early fall, when most of our bee species have already finished up for the year. Most of our flower flies lay their eggs on aphid infestations -- the larval flies look like caterpillars and feast on aphids. And they are active right up to the fall rains. Again, a tidy garden is not great for pollinators!"

For more about wild native bee species and flower flies, KWIAHT has a special website with photos: <https://sites.google.com/site/sjipollinators/home>

"Bats are our largest group of native mammals in the islands, and they are also generally pretty active until stormy cold November weather. From November to March or a bit later, bats disperse into the woods here in the islands, sleeping most of the time, but waking every few days to catch a meal and get a drink of water. It seems that moths make up the largest part of bats' winter diet -- many of the same moths that feed on trees as caterpillars. This is a really good reason not to spray pesticides, especially in the fall. A large number of larval moths absorb less-than-lethal doses of pesticides, so they survive and become moths, and bats that eat them accumulate the pesticide residues. Our lab has found garden-store pesticides in bat guano in the islands -- that is a "red flag" from the viewpoint of bat conservation!"