

# View of Sustainable Gardening

## Fall Clean Up the Green Way

Written and photographed  
by Sean James

**T**here are easy ways and hard ways of doing things. Most folks think that “eco” simply *must* be harder, since it’s a Good Thing to do. Actually, the only hard part is overcoming old ideas. Perhaps it’s a European thing, controlling our environment, but we’ve been trained to clean up every scrap in the fall and if we don’t, we’re just bad people. In reality, the best way is to leave most

attracted to the seedheads on the perennials and will therefore hang around more to eat pests. Other predators such as spiders, ladybird beetles and many more will have a place to overwinter. Praying mantids for instance lay their eggs on plant stems. Incredibly voracious garden beetles live in leaf litter and when spring breaks they eat everything from snail eggs to caterpillars. But it doesn’t end

has been left standing for the winter has form and interest. Every day is different depending on the light and the way the snow sits on the plants. It has an ethereal beauty. Plus, you can look at it with better eyes and see all the life that’s protected and encouraged within its soothing blanket.

There are exceptions, of course. Any perennial which is suffering from disease should be cut down



▲ After the glorious blooms and harvests of autumn, how much should you tidy up your garden?

things alone until the spring. What are the benefits of this?

Leaving the garden standing through the winter means many things. The plants are able to hold the snow in their crowns and shelter themselves. Birds are

there. This variety of life which balances things in the garden is referred to as “biodiversity” and it’s a very good thing.

A garden that’s been cut down and cleaned up in the fall looks like a barren wasteland. A garden that

to the ground and the waste put in the green bin instead of the composter. Control disease through sanitation. A common example is powdery mildew, that white dusting that appears on leaves and affects many plants including summer







▲ Let it be. Sean James recommends letting dead growth stand through the winter to hold snow, feed wildlife and provide visual interest.

phlox, peonies, and speedwells (*Veronica*). Another example is the disease that affects the queen of the June garden, bearded iris, which suffers from iris leaf spot. It's easy to control, though. All you have to do is cut the leaves down to a six-inch

fan in August and clean up the dead leaves, and then again in October or November. Both are easy to control as long as they're cleaned up at the end of the season.

If there are plants which become weedy from seeding down into the garden, those can be dead-headed and the waste put into the green bin.

The rest can be cut down in early April, right down to the green growth or the ground and composted. This has the added bonus of letting any organic matter, like leaves, break down into the garden soil, enriching it.

Another interesting technique is to mulch leaves into the garden and lawn instead of bagging them up. Why would we gather all the leaves, put them in paper bags, send them away with a diesel engine, mulch them up and turn them with diesel engines to make compost, and if we're particularly on the ball, bring them back to our gardens with a gas engine and apply them to our gardens...when we could just mulch them into the landscape? Put the leaves on the lawn, run over them with the lawnmower and squirt them back into the garden. What stays on the lawn will enrich the lawn and what makes it to the garden will insulate it from the winter cold. It will disappear into the soil by the end of May, promoting the whole soil micro-ecosystem including all the beneficial bacteria that help release nutrients and the mycorrhizae or fungi organisms which help plants take up water and nutrients. All good things! You can mulch up to a FOOT of leaves into your lawn without hurting it.

Isn't it interesting that you can save effort, reduce your carbon footprint, improve your biodiversity *and* make your garden more healthy and beautiful all at the same time? Mother Nature knows what she's doing. Use her as a guide and your gardening life will be better. **EV**

*Sean James is the owner of Fern Ridge Landscaping and Eco-consulting and is the Chair of Landscape Ontario's Environmental Stewardship Committee. He's also a past president of the Milton Horticultural Society and sits on the Perennial Plant Association's Environmental Committee. If you have questions or comments, email him through [editor@EscarpmntViews.ca](mailto:editor@EscarpmntViews.ca) or reach him through [www.fernrighdlandscaping.com/forum](http://www.fernrighdlandscaping.com/forum).*