

Cleaning fall gardens and the benefit to birds.....

Some gardeners like to do their garden cleanup at the end of fall, while others prefer to put it off until spring. Both approaches have advantages, but delaying cleanup until spring is more beneficial to wild birds.

Standing seed heads are a natural source of food for birds in winter, while stems make good perches. Garden debris and spent plants provide cover for wintering insects. Some birds will be able to find these and eat them during the winter months; surviving insects will be a ready food source in spring. Early in that season, birds will also use twigs, dead grasses and other debris as nesting material.

If you prefer cleaning up the garden in fall, consider leaving a few seeding plants standing, perhaps in one section. Future revisions of your garden design could include "leave-alone" areas wherever you prefer. Instead of removing debris, consider making a brush pile the birds can use as shelter, or leaving small heaps of leaves and twigs for use by wintering insects and spring's nesting birds.

Delaying your garden cleanup in fall will most benefit ground-feeding birds. Here are more ways to help ground feeders:

- Many birds that by nature forage for seed on the ground, such as mourning doves and native sparrows, will not visit a hanging feeder. (There are always exceptions, of course, even within species!)
- Ground-feeding birds will often eat the seed that falls from hanging feeders. You can also intentionally spill seed on the ground for them when filling the feeder.
- Favorite seeds among ground feeders are white proso millet and sunflower seeds. Larger species also enjoy oats.
- To help keep ground feeders healthy, periodically rake the ground beneath feeders to remove seed hulls, bird waste and spoiled seed. Ground-feeding birds are an easy target for cats, so keep your felines indoors.
- Consider sprinkling grit in a location separate from feeders and strewn seed for birds that consume it to aid their digestion. Grit can be bought at birding and farm-supply stores, or you can make your own using untreated coarse sand or fine gravel and egg or oyster shells. Sanitize the shells by boiling them for 10 minutes, and then crush them well.
- There are short-legged platform feeders designed for ground-foraging birds. Look for one with a screen as its platform, so that it drains water away from the seed. Some are roofed for further protection from the elements