

The lazy way to prepare for winter

If you let your garden go to seed, the colder months could prove the most fruitful season yet for wildlife, plants – and you.

After summer's heatwaves and drought, it's time for a garden tidy-up. But don't get carried away: a too-tidy garden can look sterile, as if it's not part of the cycle of life. A more relaxed approach means food and shelter for wildlife, natural beauty on your doorstep, protection for plants – possibly more of them – and less work for you.

Be good to bugs and beasts

Encouraging bees, butterflies and other creatures to overwinter in your garden isn't just altruistic. These creatures repay the favour by pollinating flowers and eating pests.

You can install special bug hotels, beehouses and hedgehog homes – or provide shelter for overwintering creatures just by being a bit less tidy.

This is a stunning season: branches laden with golden leaves, stems and flowerheads silhouetted against a low sun, brightly coloured berries and rosehips gleaming, sculptural dried-out flowers, stems, seedheads and pods. All more attractive when outlined in sparkling frost or wreathed in spider's webs.

Even with no outstanding autumn plants, plenty looks good – hydrangeas (leaving the dried flowerheads on protects new shoots); spiky *Nigella*

or love-in-a-mist; globe-shaped alliums; multi-branched *verbena bonariensis* (which can die back if cut back in winter).

All kinds of insects will crawl inside dry, hollow stems for winter. When you do cut them back in spring, leave them in a pile for a while so that any occupants can emerge.

Allowing seedheads to mature in situ means self-seeding, resulting in naturalistic clumps and drifts. This grouping makes it easier for bees to dot from flower to flower and, for butterflies, the stronger the colour and scent signals, the easier the flowers are to find. Any unwanted specimens can easily be pulled up come spring.

Cut back on pruning

Over-enthusiastic secateur-wielding can leave borders looking like country lanes savaged by a hedge cutter, and you'll wait months for growth to camouflage those ugly, jagged ends.

So only prune what's necessary.

That means cutting back any dead wood to healthy growth; snapped stems or branches, which can be an entry point for disease; and crossing branches that will rub each other, causing damage.

If you're overwhelmed by offcuts, you might be tempted by a bonfire. But remember the Royal Horticultural



Society's advice: "Check bonfires before they are lit for sheltering and hibernating animals, such as hedgehogs, toads and frogs."

Ivy's nectar, pollen and berries are a key food source in autumn and winter, and provide good insect-hunting opportunities for small birds.

Its dense leaf cover also provides winter quarters for Britain's five hibernating butterfly species – Brimstone, Comma, Peacock, Small Tortoiseshell and Red Admiral.

Butterflies and caterpillars will also stay in log piles, and tidy piles of twigs, and leaves in an out-of-the-way corner could also attract hibernating or nesting hedgehogs.

Make time for mulch

Mulch is a layer – which must be at least 5cm thick – of biodegradable material such as compost, bark chippings or leaf mould on top of soil. It's an environmentally friendly way of fertilising the soil, suppressing





insulates the ground, protecting plants from freezing temperatures. On its journey through the atmosphere, it also picks up nitrogen, which is essential for plant growth. However, the weight of snow can break branches, so shake them free.

Opinion varies on the benefits of keeping bird feeders all year round because of the risk of spreading disease and giving some species an unfair advantage. But feeding birds in winter – so you get to enjoy their movement and colour – helps them when they need it most.

And if you encourage insects all year round, you'll have regular feathered visitors.

The effects of climate change – more extreme weather and higher temperatures – mean that a food source relied on by one species may not be available when it's needed, making it all the more important to support our native species.

Look forward to spring flowers

Ensure a cheerful early display with spring-flowering bulbs. In November you can plant snowdrops, grape hyacinth (muscari), tulips and camassia. These early flowerers are a crucial source of nectar at a time when food sources for pollinators are scarce.

Once they've been planted, your work is done, and they'll reliably reappear year after year.

So leave the great big outdoor clear-up to when life begins to burst forth again. This autumn, sit back, relax and enjoy looking out on the wildlife-friendly winter garden you've created, knowing that, come spring, it'll be good to grow. 🍀

weeds and conserving water, and helping to warm the soil come spring.

The RHS says: "This is a really useful technique, which saves on work because it helps prevent weeds growing and stops water evaporating – meaning you'll need to do less watering and weeding. And it smartens up the garden too."

An organic mulch also attracts worms, which are an indicator of soil fertility. They eat organic material in the soil, which breaks it down, bringing oxygen and water to roots, and promoting healthy growth. And that means less digging.

If you're heading for your compost bin for mulch, keep an eye out for frogs, toads and other animals that may be enjoying the warmth inside. You can also use fallen leaves for mulching, so don't rake and bin them.

Speed up the transfer of nutrients into the soil by making leaf mould. Build a bin from wooden stakes and wire netting, or simply scoop the

leaves into bin liners, sprinkle with water and pierce the bin liner a few times and leave for a couple of years.

Fastest and easiest of all, spread fallen leaves directly onto flowerbeds. If you're really lucky, the trees may even drop them in the right place. Fallen leaves create a superb foraging habitat for thrushes and blackbirds in winter, and frogs and invertebrates can overwinter among them.

Ice and snow

If you've been digging recently, don't fret about achieving a fine, crumbly texture, unless you're planting something immediately. Frost and snow during the winter will help break up large clods of earth.

A beautiful blanket of snow

“Leaves in an out-of-the-way corner could attract nesting or hibernating hedgehogs