

## Pollinator-Friendly Garden Care

By Cayte McDonough

As the days lengthen and snow melts, who can resist dreaming about lush and colorful gardens of the coming spring and summer? While we may take great joy in viewing our gardens, the choices we make about garden care can help sustain wildlife including small but vital pollinators. For many of us gardeners, fall is the time to clean up our gardens. We have been conditioned to cut stems of perennials to the ground, rake the leaves, and make everything look tidy before the ground freezes. It's time to rethink that approach based on current science.

In recent years, we have seen more and more headlines about steep declines in insect populations. While some might welcome fewer bugs in their lives, this is very bad news for the health of our planet, for bird populations, for agricultural food production and therefore human populations, for functioning ecosystems, and for all the benefits associated with species diversity. The reasons for these declines are myriad: loss of habitat, pathogens, use of pesticides, climate change and associated shifting seasons, light and other types of pollution, predation, invasive species, and more.

Here in Conway, we can take steps to support insect species, including native pollinators. Many of our native bees overwinter in hollow plant stems as larvae. If we stop the practice of cutting back the stems in the fall, we preserve safe winter residences for those future pollinators. We can also leave the leaves in our garden beds, creating a natural mulch that suppresses weeds and insulates plant roots during the winter, just as nature does in unmanaged woodlands. The leaves also provide shelter for insect eggs, larvae, and adults. A sampling of the insects and life stages that overwinter in leaf litter include the eggs of Red-banded Hairstreaks (*Calycopis cecrops*), the pupae of Luna Moths (*Actias luna*), the larvae of Isabella Tiger Moths (aka Woolly Bears, *Pyrrharctia isabella*), and bumblebee queens, who alone start the next generation each spring.

For advice on how to tend to our gardens in a pollinator-friendly way, we can look to award-winning author Heather Holm, an expert on the interactions between native bees and native flora, and the bees' natural history and biology. Heather outlines the steps below to create habitat for stem-nesting bees, and explains how that coincides with their year-long life cycle. To view Heather Holm's poster illustrating the life cycle of stem-nesting bees, visit the following website and search for "stem-nesting bees": <https://www.pollinatorsnativeplants.com/plant-lists--posters.html>

- Winter: Leave stems of perennials intact.
- Spring: Once night temperatures are consistently above 50 degrees, cut back dead flower stalks, leaving stubble of varying height from 8 to 24 inches. Why? Female bees find cut or naturally open stems; they start nests in the stems, lay eggs, and provision each with pollen balls to feed the larvae.
- Summer: New growth of the perennial hides the stem stubble. Bee larvae develop in the cut dead stems during the growing season.
- Fall and Winter: Again, leave the stems of current year's growth. Bees (from nests created in spring) hibernate in stems during the winter.
- Spring: Cut back dead flower stalks to varying heights. Older stem stubble will naturally decompose. Adult bees emerge and start nests in newly cut dead stems or in naturally-occurring open stems, completing the life cycle.

In spring 2022, [Pollinate Conway!](#) volunteers installed a new native plant pollinator garden at the Library Island. There, we are following these simple steps. With this approach, the garden may look less tidy to some people during transitional stages, but to some of our native pollinators it looks like a welcoming home.

Want to get involved with Pollinate Conway!? Contact us at [PollinateConway@gmail.com](mailto:PollinateConway@gmail.com).