

SUSTAINABILITY IS NOT JUST FOR VEGETABLES

By Maritta Perry Grau, Frederick County Master Gardener, January, 2025

Recently, one early morning I was laughing out loud as I looked out our dining room window at about a dozen house finches jumping around, rooting (beaking??) in the detritus of a narrow flower bed along our front walk. They were flipping leaves on the ground, zipping up to the still-standing seedheads of mums, black-eyed Susans, and coneflowers. Sometimes it seemed one bird was warning another off his territory as both aimed for the same seedhead. Lots of wing fluttering before one of them would fly off to another area.

It warms my heart to watch these antics but even more, it warms my heart to know these little creatures have a safe haven (at least, when the hawk's not around). More and more of these birds, insects, and other pollinators overwinter safely because more and more gardeners are practicing "sustainable gardening" and developing "resilient landscapes," even though the gardeners may not realize they are following the precepts of sustainability.

"Sustainable gardening" is most often associated with growing vegetables, especially organics, but its principles can be applied to home landscapes, too. UMD recommends eight best practices for sustainable gardening: Protect and improve the soil; recycle plants and nutrients; water and fertilize wisely; control stormwater; increase biodiversity; utilize an Integrated Pest Management program; attract and conserve pollinators and natural enemies; and, finally, rely as much as possible on locally available materials and resources.

In a 2022 blog <marylandgrows.umd.edu>, Dr. Anahi Espindola, an assistant professor in the Department of Entomology at the University of Maryland, points out that "Even when they look dry and 'dead,' our green spaces are full of life.... [H]erbaceous perennials... are... retreating underground, while annuals [spend] the winter as seeds in the ground.... Squirrels become less active, snakes retreat to sheltered spaces, and insects may overwinter as adults underground or in crevasses or as juveniles in their nests or chrysalises."

I've mentioned before that certain solitary bees like to lay eggs in the hollow stems of plants such as black-eyed Susans, zinnias, bee balm, sunflowers, and asters; or in the beehouses you can make simply by bundling hollow tubes in a suitably sized PCV pipe or other structure, and hanging the resulting bee house in a tree or shrub. You'll be glad to know that leaving all this detritus—leaves, dead flower stalks and seedheads, etc.—helps not just the pollinating bees, but also other pollinators such as butterflies and moths. "[T]he leaf litter acts as a protective layer for pollinators, buffering them from extreme temperatures and protecting them from predators," Dr. Espindola writes.

Our Master Gardeners' winter 2024-25 newsletter, *Garden Smart* (formerly called *What Can We Do for You?*) includes a short article on how to help beneficial insects overwinter in your yard. The article points out that "Quite a few beneficial insect species in Maryland spend the winter months in one of their life stages, and many require plant debris like leaves, pithy woody stems,

and flower stalks as winter habitat. You can support pollinators, beneficial insects, and other native wildlife in your landscape by: adding a new native plant, leaving the leaves in your beds and around trees, waiting until spring to prune woody plants, leaving flower stalks and seed heads, creating a brush pile, and educating your neighbors.” If you don’t already get our free newsletter, you can subscribe to it at fgardenersnews@gmail.com.

Locally, the University of Maryland Extension Frederick County Office is located at 330 Montevue Lane, Frederick, MD. Check our website or Facebook for 2025’s upcoming free seminars, Master Gardener certification classes, gardening information, advice, and publications (some in Spanish), as well as other announcements, at the following URLs, or call us at 301-600-1596. Note that some of the links to the University of Maryland Extension Frederick County Office and Master Gardeners pages have been changed: the links are now much shorter.

- Frederick County Master Gardeners’ website, bit.ly/FCMG-Home-Gardening
- Facebook, <https://bit.ly/FCMGFacebook>
- University of Maryland Extension Home and Garden Information Center and advice, bit.ly/B-WForms
- Frederick County Master Gardeners publications, <http://extension.umd.edu/locations/frederick-county/home-gardening>
- Instagram: <https://bit.ly/FCMGinstagram>



Solitary bee tubes

A bee “house” designed for solitary bees can easily be made of bamboo tubes bundled into a length of PVC pipe. The bee will lay its eggs in one of these tubes, then plug the hole with mud or some other debris to keep the developing eggs safe until they hatch in the spring. (Photo by author)

A Sparrow scratching in the leaves

A sparrow scratches around for food in the detritus of a winter garden. (Photo by author)





Frosted Mums

Leaving most dead flowers and other plants through the winter helps protect pollinators. Here, mums that have been killed off by winter's frost give both shelter and food to overwintering insects, larvae, birds and other creatures. (Photo by author)

Frosted Coneflower

A coneflower seedhead, frosted by winter, still provides food for overwintering pollinators. (Photo by author)



House Finches

A pair of house finches sits on a winter-bare redbud tree, the shelter of arborvitae close behind them. They may glean insects from the tree branches or swoop down to find more food—insects, larvae, etc.—in the detritus under the trees. (Photo by author)

University programs, activities, and facilities are available to all without regard to race, color, sex, gender identity or expression, sexual orientation, marital status, age, national origin, political affiliation, physical or mental disability, religion, protected veteran status, genetic information, personal appearance, or any other legally protected class.