

FALL TRADITIONS FOR THE GARDEN

By Maritta Perry Grau, Frederick County Master Gardener, October, 2023

I love fall traditions, whether it's decorating house and yard for Halloween and all things fall, or prepping gardens with end-of-season finishing touches.

Each fall, we overwinter some herbs and some of summer's decorative plants; gather seeds from a few of our favorite annuals, and dig up caladium, elephant ear roots, and calla and canna lilies to store away until next spring.

Other traditional chores include removing any diseased plants and debris from our garden beds and trimming back irises, lavender, and coreopsis. However, we don't cut down the coneflowers and black-eyed Susans or rake the garden beds bare of all plants and leaves. Our beds may look a little messy to non-gardeners, but the seedheads of various flowers provide lots of food for overwintering birds. Just last week early one morning I saw six yellow finches feeding on the coneflower seedheads next to our front porch.

In addition, leaving at least some debris to disintegrate on the garden beds is another way of protecting our beneficial pollinators--garden insects and birds, among others. Some insects will lay eggs in the broken, hollow stems of plants; some under the dropped leaves; some in the soil. In bad weather, while most birds may take shelter in trees, shrubs, or even empty birdhouses, some seek shelter and food (yes, they'll eat some of the beneficial insects/larvae, but also lots of predators) in little piles of garden debris such as tree/shrub trimmings of branches and logs, perhaps tidied away in a far corner of the yard.

Another tradition is putting our lawn to bed for the winter. Did you know that Maryland has a lawn fertilizer law? It states that residents may not apply fertilizers that contain phosphorus or nitrogen to our lawns between November 15th and March 1st, and soil tests are required before applying phosphorus. And why? To protect the quality of our water—too much nitrogen in our water sources is not healthy for us and can lead to severe complications for infants. You are still allowed to apply potassium and lime, as the state does not consider those chemicals a threat to water quality.

The Maryland State Department also notes that we are not supposed to use fertilizer products to melt ice or snow from steps, driveways, sidewalks, etc., for much the same reasons as applying phosphorus and nitrogen to the lawn: it affects the quality of the water we all use. "Applying fertilizer to hard or frozen ground provides a direct pathway for nutrient runoff into storm drains that feed into the Chesapeake Bay."

Unfortunately, we've had to add a new tradition the past couple of years that seems like that Whack-a-Mole game: getting rid of the tree from hell, er, rather, tree of heaven, *Ailanthus altissima*. "Tree of heaven" is a misnomer if there ever was one, and I'm not the only writer to call it the tree from hell; see also, FNP's article on Sept. 20, "'Hellish' tree of heaven weeds out native plants." As the Old Coach can attest, its leaves, branches, seeds and bark all can irritate the skin with itchy rashes.

“Whack-a-Mole” seems apropos, too, as cutting it down is a bit like cutting down thistles or pulling up bind weed vines—the roots that remain in the ground send up even more shoots. It’s also allelopathic—that is, it exudes a chemical into the soil that kills off other plants near it. And if all that weren’t enough, it is the main host for the horrific, invasive spotted lanternfly, which in turn destroys many crops and other plants.

Web sites advise that you cut the tree of heaven as close to the ground as you can and immediately apply a systemic herbicide to the stump. “Otherwise, [within five minutes] the surface will have closed up and the herbicide won’t penetrate the tissue,” notes <thespruce.com>.



Coneflower seedheads: Coneflowers and black-eyed Susans, both native plants, are among the many flower seedheads that can be left intact for birds to feed on during winter months. (Photo courtesy of the author)

Earlier in the fall, a bright yellow **male finch** (on left) **and a female** feed on seeds on stalks of wild spearmint. (Photo courtesy of the author)



A male yellow finch perches on the **seedhead of a coneflower**. Such seedheads, left standing in the garden, will help sustain finches and other birds for most of the winter. (Photo courtesy of the author)



A **male housefinch**, also called a purple finch, feeds on seeds of wild spearmint. (Photo courtesy of the author)



A **female yellow finch** feeds on the seeds of wild spearmint. Such seeds will help sustain the birds for most of the winter. (Photo courtesy of the author)

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