



## Ashford Pollinator Pathway News

By Jennifer Sterling-Folker, October 2024



Greetings Ashford! LEAVE THE LEAVES! That seems to be the new mantra when it comes to native plant gardening in the fall, but I find it really difficult to follow this advice. While there are good reasons to “leave the leaves” & plant stalks standing, too much leaf litter creates soggy conditions that smother, grass, plants & moss, while plant stalks often break or flop over, particularly

under the weight of winter snow. By the time spring rolls around, my garden is a hot, soggy mess!

But there are soooo many good reasons to “leave the leaves” along with standing flower stalks. A **thin layer** of leaf litter provides winter habitat for many pollinating insects, as well as the cocoons & chrysalids of butterflies & moths like the Hummingbird Clearwing Moth, Luna Moths and Swallowtail Butterflies. Red-banded Hairstreaks lay their eggs on fallen oak leaves, which are the first food their caterpillars eat when emerging in the spring. Great Spangled Fritillary & Woolly Bear Caterpillars seek protection from predators and the winter cold under leaf piles. And Queen Bumble Bees burrow a few inches into the soil under the leaves which provide winter protection from the cold. If you remove the leaf litter, you are also removing next summer’s pollinators.

In addition, decaying leaves support tiny creatures, micro-organisms and fungi which are often a crucial food source for various pollinators in the early spring when other food options are limited. Finally, leaf litter insulates perennials, retains moisture in the soil which helps perennials survive the winter, releases nutrients that promote healthy soil, and prevent soil erosion. If you must remove or thin the leaf litter out, gently rake or leaf blow and pile the leaves elsewhere while avoiding the use of heavy equipment, shredders or burning the leaves.

As for flower stalks, Goldfinches & other birds regularly visit the seed stalks of dead Coneflowers, Evening Primrose, Goldenrod, Wild Bergamot and many others. Cutting these stalks deprives birds of an essential food source. If you must cut them, consider stacking the stalks upright somewhere else in your yard so the birds can still visit them for seeds. For flowers with pithy stalks, such as Milkweed, Cardinal Flower, Joe Pye Weed, Anise Hyssop, Bee Balm, Mountain Mint or Sunflower, you can also cut the stalks of these flowers to varying heights (8-24 inches) for stem-nesting bees to use the following summer.

Finally, if you are worried about what the neighbors might think of your messy yard, the Xerces Society has “Leave the Leaves” Yard Signs available in exchange for a donation that will let them know it’s messy for a good reason.



## Pollinator Spotlight

**Woolly bear caterpillars** are the larva of the Isabella tiger moth. They are a frequent sight in yards & on roadsides at this time of year as they begin to search for safe places to overwinter under leaves, bark & inside crevices. They have 13 distinct segments that are black at the caterpillar’s ends and rusty brown in its middle.



Weather folklore says that the ratio of rusty to black bands on a Woolly Bear Caterpillar can forecast the severity of the coming winter. If their rusty bands are wider, it will supposedly be a mild winter. If there are more black than rust segments, the winter will supposedly be severe. Like Punxsutawney Phil’s shadow predicting how much longer winter will last, we should take this folklore with a grain of salt. There is little scientific evidence that the caterpillar’s segments can actually predict the weather. Still, it’s fun to count the segments of any Woolly Bear you encounter & it’s a beautiful moth the following year.

We still have free **Milkweed** and **Nodding Onion** seeds that need cold stratification to bloom next spring and now is the time to start thinking about planting them. Email me if you would like some ([jsfolker@yahoo.com](mailto:jsfolker@yahoo.com)).