

# MAINTENANCE GUIDE FOR NATIVE PLANTS

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Native plant gardens require less maintenance than traditional gardens, and are full of life, beauty, and opportunities to observe nature. Key actions include establishing a organic mulch layer, weeding regularly in the first 1-3 years, and leaving dead plant material for pollinators, only cleaning up in late spring to allow wildlife to survive the winter.



A native bee emerges from its nest in the ground in early spring.

## SPRING

### Rethinking Garden Clean Up

As natural gardeners we need to learn to give more control back to nature in the garden. Managing our gardens consciously, looking to **find balance between the needs of humans with the needs of nature**.

1. **Do “as little as possible, as late as possible”** when it comes to spring garden chores. Wait until temperatures are consistently above 10 degrees celcius (late May) to clean up garden beds. This allows insects and other creatures overwintering in dead stems and leaf litter to emerge.
2. **Cut and Leave Stems** Instead of removing stems you can cut back to lengths of 8 to 24 inches at the base of the plant. Pay special attention to hollow or pithy stems like Joe Pye Weed, goldenrods, bee balms, and raspberries, that provide nesting places for many of our native bees. Wherever possible skip cutting back altogether, and let spring growth come up around your plants.
3. **Chop and Drop** When cutting upper stems, snip in lengths of 6 to 8 inches and let drop to the ground, creating free mulch, nutrients, and habitat. Many birds will use fibers from old stems to build their nests.
4. **Native Grasses** Cut back old grasses to 6-8 inches above the ground to make room for new growth. Often native ground nesting bees enjoy the bare earth around the base of grasses to make their nests. Tread lightly.
5. **Tread Lightly in the Garden** Lay down stepping stones and try to use them for maintenance rather than tramping through the garden which will compact the soil and potentially harm ground nesting native bees.
6. **Digging/Edging** Minimize digging and edging tasks as much as possible until late spring. Spades or forks can easily harm toads who are still buried in the soil.
7. **Pruning** typically doesn't harm insects but keep an eye out for overwintering chrysalises and cocoons that are usually camouflaged.
8. **Mulch** Avoid wood mulch (except during a garden's establishment years) because it prevents ground nesting bees from making nests or emerging from them. Ditch the wood mulch and follow [the principles of natural garden design](#) instead by covering the ground with living, green mulch.

## SUMMER

1. **Weeding** Hand-pull or cut at the base invasive or unwanted weeds regularly.

2. **Water** in the morning to reduce evaporation and avoid wet leaves overnight, which can contribute to mildew and other plant issues. Occasional deep watering is better than frequent shallow watering
3. **Add a Water Source** A water source is essential to wildlife, such as a bird bath, wildlife pond, bee bath, mister, bird bath dripper. Make sure to rinse and refill every day or two. Clean water is essential to healthy birds. More details regarding the smaintenance of a birdbath:  
<https://www.audubon.org/magazine/why-you-should-keep-your-birdbath-clean>
4. **Holes in Leaves – Yay!** Learn to see holes, munch marks, or leaf cocoons on leaves as a cause for celebration. Most insects seen on native plants are a sign of a thriving and biodiverse garden!

## FALL

1. **Leave seed heads** up over winter to provide crucial food for birds (like goldfinches), and nesting habitat for beneficial insects. Roots and biomass will protect the soil and prevent erosion.
2. **Divide or give away** established plants and vigorous growers like some goldenrod or asters if they crowd out other species.
3. **Leave the Leaves** Leaving leaves in a native plant garden provides critical ecological benefits, acting as natural mulch, fertilizer, and essential habitat for pollinators and beneficial insects. This "leaf litter" layer insulates plants, retains soil moisture, suppresses weeds, and sustains a healthy, nutrient-rich soil biome while protecting overwintering creatures like moths, butterflies, and firefly larvae.
4. **Brush pile, Log stack** Do you have a barely utilized corner in your back yard? Creating a brush pile, or log stack will provide critical habitat, shelter, and food for wildlife. In developed, "tidy" landscapes, many species struggle to find adequate protection, making these piles crucial for supporting biodiversity like the mourning cloak butterfly.

## **CUES TO CARE**

Native plant gardens can sometimes be perceived to be “messy”. Cues to care are visual indicators that your garden is intentional and mindful. Think neatly maintained edging, educational signage, and using design principals like planting in drifts and repetition. Incorporating landscape features like a bird bath, garden bench, garden art etc.

### **What to Avoid:**

- **Fertilizers:** Native plants are adapted to local soil and rarely need extra fertilizer.
- **Volcano Mulching:** Never pile mulch against the stem of a plant, tree or shrub.
- **Excessive Cleaning:** Leaving organic debris is vital for habitat.

Native plants have been steadily growing in popularity, which brings new acceptance of replacing part of your lawn or landscape with native plants, and reaping the benefits such as less maintenance, lower water bills, and the joy and beauty of a lively yard full of bird song, native flowers blooming throughout the seasons, and connecting to the local land you live on.

Feel good knowing the incredible ecological benefits you are bringing to the community such as carbon sequestration, managing the local watershed, soil stabilization, feeding pollinators, and contributing to the food web.