

Perennial Pages

Gardens for Clean Water: A Seasonal Newsletter for Habitat Owners & Caretakers



Connecting people, science, and nature for a healthy Delaware River and Bay



Autumn Color, Newark, Delaware. Photo: Sarah Bouboulis

Change Is in the Air

Fall is a time to prepare for the harsh winter ahead. This is true for both us and the plants we care for. The temperature begins to drop, the days get shorter, and garden interest turns from flowers to colorful foliage.

In this issue of *Perennial Pages*, we'll try to better understand what is happening in our garden habitats. This way, we can better care for our gardens and the creatures they support. Along with our regular features and maintenance guide, we'll also take a look at trees and shrubs and the important role they play in our native landscapes.



Fallen leaves in a stream. Photo: Angela Padeletti

Time for Action: Leave the Leaves

Many people might be tempted to "clean-up" in the fall. Plants start dying back and leaves start dropping. If you wish to support more than just the vegetation with your garden habitat, "leave the leaves!" Aesthetics can be incorporated into any garden, but you may want to consider the needs of the animals that use the space when making garden maintenance decisions.

- The **seeds** of many native plants provide food for birds and insects throughout the fall and winter. If you cut down the "spent" flower heads, you are removing a food source. To provide food for these creatures, leave the flower heads until spring. In highly visible areas, try using plants that stay "attractive" into the fall, including autumn sneezeweed (*Helenium autumnale*) and New York ironweed (*Vernonia noveboracensis*). Many shrubs also maintain interest throughout the season, including sweet pepperbush (*Clethra alnifolia*), and many different species of *Viburnum*.
- Many creatures use **fallen leaves** as their homes over the winter months. Leaves provide protection from predators and insulation from freezing temperatures. When we remove leaves, we are removing habitat for some of those creatures (primarily insects, but also some mammals and reptiles). You can either completely leave them be, or move the leaves to your garden beds as free mulch! You can read more about the benefits leaves provide from the [Xerces Society](#).
- Fall is a great time to **plant!** Many shrubs and trees do very well when they are planted in the fall. Our area usually receives a good bit of rain and plants don't become scorched by the summer sun. Planting perennials in the fall can be tricky, so ask your retailer if it is a good time to plant the species you are interested in growing.
- Fall is generally a great time for **pruning** most shrubs. Birds are generally done using them for nests and the shrubs will respond best when they are no longer actively growing. Pruning can be "plant specific" so you may want to do a quick internet search before you start chopping away. There are many educational videos on YouTube about pruning if you have the time. [See: How to Prune Landscape Trees and Shrubs](#)



Buttonbush, *Cephalanthus occidentalis*, Sussex County, Delaware. Photo: Sarah Bouboulis

A Note on Trees and Shrubs

Fall can be a great time to plant trees and shrubs. If space is available, these plants can provide excellent habitat benefits. Oak, hickory, and beech trees are known to be some of the best tree species for supporting wildlife. The sheer size of trees really adds to their habitat benefits, and they also provide varying benefits throughout the year:

Spring: Many trees flower early in the spring and provide some of the first food sources for pollinators.

Summer: Leaves provide food for a vast array of butterfly and moth larvae, which in turn, provide food for baby birds. (Renowned Delaware Entomologist, Doug Tallamy, states that oak trees (as a group) support 534 species of larvae!)

Fall/Winter: Seeds (acorns, nuts, etc.) of these trees continue to provide food for mammals and birds.

If you don't quite have the space for a tree, consider bushes and shrubs. They can provide similar year-round benefits on a slightly smaller scale. Some attractive shrubs with great wildlife benefits include, serviceberry (*Amelanchier canadensis*), high-bush blueberry (*Vaccinium corymbosum*) and red-osier dogwoods (*Cornus sericea*).

Trees and shrubs are also great for water filtration, as well as stemming soil erosion and slowing stormwater runoff. River birch (*Betula nigra*) and buttonbush (*Cephalanthus occidentalis*, pictured above) are two species known for their particularly "thirsty" habits for wet spots. However, nearly any native tree or shrub will provide water quality benefits in a garden setting.

Trees and shrubs provide the most bang for your habitat-value buck!

What's "up"?

Seasonal Plant Identification



Swamp sunflower, *Helianthus angustifolius*. Photo: Sarah Bouboulis

This issue's highlight is an autumn winner for sure! Swamp sunflower (*Helianthus angustifolius*) provides a beautiful end to the growing season. By mid-September it is just starting to get flower buds and can continue to bloom through the first frost. It can take moist to wet soils (good for rain gardens!). It is a very tall plant, certainly make a statement. It also provides food for both birds and pollinators late into the fall.

[Read More](#)

Space Invaders

Invasive Species Spotlight



Sweet autumn clematis, *Clematis terniflora*. Photo: Anne McCormack

In September and October, you may notice a white flowery vine along many of our area roadways. This vine is likely sweet autumn clematis, (*Clematis terniflora*). This vine was introduced for its flowers and fragrance, but since then it has aggressively spread into natural areas. Unfortunately, many invasive plants, like this one, continue to be sold at garden centers. If you see something, say something! Education and shifting buying habits are the only way to get this species (as well as other invasives) out of the garden shops.

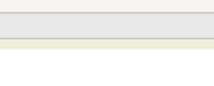
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PDE News

Did you see the "Digging Deeper" section of the PDE newsletter? [Read it here](#). If you have a gardening question that you want answered, email sbouboulis@delawareestuary.org and it might get featured!

Want to support Perennial Pages into the future? PDE's annual fundraising dinner is coming up. Learn more about it [here](#). Or hit the "Donate" button below.

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The Partnership for the Delaware Estuary, host of the Delaware Estuary Program, leads science-based and collaborative efforts to improve the tidal Delaware River and Bay, which spans Delaware, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania.

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