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OBSERVER ORGANIC ALLOTMENT BLOG



Caroline Foley's expert guide to a few things to do in November

It's all about the soil, birds and beasties this month



Shred leaves now for mulch in the spring. All photographs Howard Sooley

In November, Mother Nature recycles. The last leaves fall off the trees, plants wither away, insects and other wildlife die and all is returned to the soil to enrich it for the new life next spring.

Following this example, use your old compost to make a warm mulch blanket on the borders and build a [new compost heap](#). Try the latest thinking and chop up everything first to speed up the process.



At [Kew Gardens](#), where the [compost heaps](#) are among the largest non-commercial ones in Europe all the material is shredded first. You can see from a viewing platform in the Pinetum two hefty compost mountains. One is for woody material and the other for soft herbaceous stuff. Quite often there are peacocks on top basking in the warmth to complete the picture.

Once set, the heaps are given the occasional watering and turning by a JCB. The end result – a mere eight weeks later – is mixed with well rotted stable manure and put back as a mulch on the beds. Incidentally, Kew set an example when it decided 32 years ago to ban peat for use in the gardens.

Shredding or mowing over the leaves for leaf mould will also give you results in half the time. Chopped leaves left to rot down now should provide you with good mulching material by next spring or excellent, free potting compost within the year, instead of the usual two.



When putting the plot to bed, give extra consideration to wildlife. Being generally quiet in winter, allotments can make superb wildlife habitats, especially important in the cities and towns.

Keep a few leaves back and rake them into corners or under hedges for undisturbed winter habitats for hibernating invertebrates and for foraging thrushes and blackbirds. Frogs also like to overwinter in a comfy bed of damp leaves as well as at the bottom of ponds (where they will appreciate the shelter of a clay tile) and around damp, rotting wood.



A pile of big stones or a log pile in a shady spot provides birds with live food. The log pile will attract the dead wood species, about three-quarters of which are endangered beetle larvae. On their trail come spiders, false scorpions and wasps, scavenging beetles, hoverflies and millipedes. A log pile covered with dead leaves will also attract toads and hedgehogs, newts, centipedes, leaf cutter bees and violet ground beetles, moths and wood gnats, as well as frogs.

If you can, get hold of a dead branch from an established woodland. It will have a ready-to-go colony of dead wood species in it. Bury the bottom logs to keep the pile reptilian cool and damp. Grow ivy over it for good measure. If you live in the south, you may attract the rare stag beetle which lays its eggs near rotting wood to hatch out several years later. Avoid having a bonfire for Guy Fawkes night. If you do, check for

sitting tenants before you light it.



Any plants that have seed or berries will provide food for the birds. Berry eaters include blackbirds, thrushes, redwings and fieldfares, the warblers, finches, wood pigeons, starlings and robins. You might even decide to get in some plants in especially for them. Our native rowan, whitebeam, spindle, dog and guelder rose, hawthorn and honeysuckle will provide a good winter larder up until January. Holly and ivy berry away right through winter. Ivy also makes good cover for nesting. Imports like cotoneaster, pyracantha and berberis are also excellent additions.

For the seed eaters – most notably finches but also blackbirds and tits - teasel, sunflowers, golden rod, Michelmas daisies, cow parsley and yarrow will provide a winter supply. You could try growing a bit of grain – wheat, barley, rye, millet or oats. Don't cut down plants with hollow stems until spring as they make homes for hibernating insects including the useful solitary bees and ladybirds.



If DIY is more your thing, you can easily knock up some insect hotels as well as bat and bird boxes. Site them carefully. Clean out old bird boxes and buy in some bird food. Put bird feed out at different levels as some birds prefer to feed high up and others prefer to eat at ground level. Fresh water for drinking and bathing is essential.

It is all quite a lot of work and, once started, must be kept up. But it is a good feeling, when you put your feet up by the fire of a winter's evening, to know the wildlife on your plot is well fed and tucked up too.

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sparclear

1 November 2011 12:31PM

Caroline, lovely article, many thanks.

Re: **bird care**.

Bird-tables providing year round man made food are perhaps weakening the wild flocks. Naturally growing berries & wild flower seeds are a much better idea as birds will fly in for a week or two and then move on, for their vitality. Besides much commercial bird food is non-organic, even GM, no thanks.

There are wart diseases currently rampant, amongst the finch clan most noticeably giving foot and beak problems: a good reason to shut down & clean the bird table, and only use it in extremis. I would use soap and a kitchen scour pad for this job, not strong chemicals. Also cooking oil if the wood needs any preservative afterwards.

If possible ensure bird feeding excludes big crows, gulls and pigeons, also squirrels. Temporarily suspending the food supply needn't mean no pretty nature watching from the house. Waterdish right near a rain barrel makes it easy to change the water every day. A lot of colourful visitors appreciate it all summer.

Deep, frosty winter is different. Frogs will only be safe in ponds more than 2ft deep.

The non-hibernating creatures like a wide-open area away from anywhere a cat or hawk could be lurking. They get apples, wholemeal breadcrumbs & porridge oats, and lard in a shallow saucer. Food cast across a broad area prevents fighting. Their bowl of water gets sent outdoors into the middle of this area twice a day, fresh half-warmed by the kettle.

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65scratch

1 November 2011 2:03PM

sparclear

providing year round man made food are perhaps weakening the wild flock

What nonsense - does providing food 3 times a day weaken my family & me? I'll continue to follow the RSPB's advice - *Although winter feeding benefits birds most, food shortages*

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can occur at any time of the year. By feeding the birds year round, you'll give them a better chance to survive the periods of food shortage whenever they may occur.

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