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WINTER GARDEN PREP CHECKLIST FOR YOUR POLLINATOR- AND WILDLIFE-FRIENDLY YARD

PLANT YOUR EARLY-POPPING EPHEMERALS

Plant fall-planted bulbs like daffodils, tulips, crocus, etc. Doing so will spark a cascade of late winter to late spring blooms.

SOW NATIVE SEEDS

Why: Most natives require periods of stratification, scarification, or freeze and thaw cycles to break down the seed's shell.

How:

To maximize germination, manage this cycle in your fridge at home (visit the [Front Range Wild One's Colorado Plant Seed Collecting and Germination Guide](#) for step-by-step instructions).

Or to simplify your life, sow the seeds in the ground in November and let nature take its course!

LEAVE THE LEAVES (MOSTLY)

Why: Leaf litter provides crucial overwintering habitat for butterflies (like mourning cloaks), moths, and solitary bees. Leaves also decompose, feeding the soil microorganisms that make soil nutrients available for uptake by vegetation. This can help minimize fertilizer requirements and keep your soil and plants thriving at no cost to you!

How:

Leave a layer of leaves under trees, shrubs, and in flower or garden beds.

Shred or lightly mulch only pathways or turf areas to prevent smothering grass.

Avoid raking or blowing everything bare - even a thin layer of leaves helps.

MULCH GENTLY, BUT NOT EVERYWHERE

Why: Mulch moderates soil temperature, prevents heaving from freeze-thaw, and protects roots.

How:

Apply mulch up to 2–3" (as needed) of shredded bark or compost after first hard frost. Consider garden type – don't mulch rock gardens, gravel pathways, or areas you'd like plants to fill in.

Avoid heavy mulching directly on native bee nesting areas (open soil patches).

Keep mulch a few inches away from crowns of perennials and tree trunks.

SKIP HEAVY CLEANUP

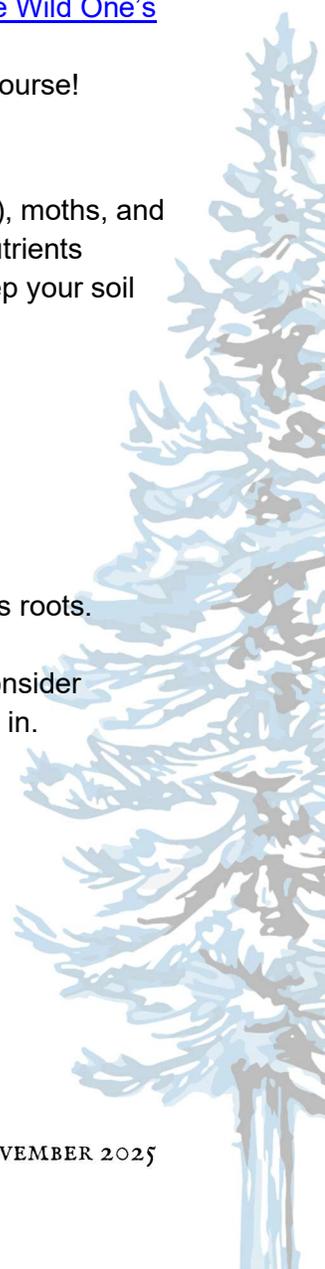
Why: Beneficial insects overwinter in dead foliage, under bark, or within soil litter.

How:

Leave fallen stems, brush piles, and leaf litter until April or May.

Avoid tilling or disturbing soil — it disrupts nesting bees and butterfly pupae.

Remove only diseased material (like peony leaves with botrytis).





LEAVE SOME STEMS STANDING

Why: Many native bees nest in hollow or pithy stems (like echinacea, bee balm, penstemon, and raspberry canes).

How:

Cut perennials 12–18 inches high, not flush to the ground.

The open ends of those stems will become cozy nesting sites for the next generation.

Wait until late spring (May) to cut them fully down — after overwintering insects emerge.

KEEP SEED HEADS FOR WILDLIFE

Why: Finches, chickadees, and overwintering insects use seed heads as food and shelter.

How:

Leave coneflowers, rudbeckia, liatris, asters, and grasses standing through winter.

They look beautiful with frost and snow, too!

If desired, remove in early spring once birds have picked them clean.

WATER DEEPLY BEFORE THE GROUND FREEZES

Why: Colorado's dry winters stress plants, especially evergreens and newly planted trees/shrubs.

How:

Give everything a deep soak before the soil freezes (usually early–mid November).

Continue monthly winter watering on warm days (>40°F) when soil is unfrozen, especially for trees and shrubs newly planted this past season.

CREATE OR MAINTAIN WINTER HABITAT FEATURES

Add a bee hotel or bundle of stems tucked under eaves.

Leave a few logs or brush piles in a corner for bumblebees, beetles, and small mammals.

Place flat rocks for basking insects in spring.

Provide a shallow water dish with stones for pollinators on warm winter days.

WAIT TO PRUNE SHRUBS AND TREES

Why: In the fall and early winter, trees and shrubs are reorienting energy from their leaves and limbs to their roots in order to buckle down for the winter. If you prune too early, you'll remove precious energy stores from the plant and create a stress reaction right before the winter (already a stressful season for plants).

How:

Mark any unwanted branches with twine or ribbon during the fall season so that they're easy to identify when you're ready.

Wait until mid-to-late winter to trim these branches but be sure to do so before things begin to leaf out.

Always trim less than 20% of a shrub or tree at any one time in order to avoid over-stressing the plant.

WANT SOME MORE GUIDANCE?

Contact Blue Spruce Horticulture for a one-hour garden consultation or to learn more about our Garden Maintenance Services.

