

Spring Maintenance for Ecological Gardens

MHLA plantings are intended to support both plant health and habitat. Spring maintenance should therefore be selective rather than a full seasonal cleanup.

Timing

Delay major cutback until at least mid- to late April, and ideally until after apple and pear blossoms have faded. This helps protect overwintering pollinators and other beneficial insects that use dried stems and leaf litter as shelter.

Leaf litter

Leave leaf litter in planting beds, especially under shrubs and in less formal areas. If leaves are too thick around emerging plants, thin, fluff, or move them deeper into the bed rather than bagging and removing them.

Standing stems

Instead of cutting everything to the ground, retain many perennial stems through winter and then cut back selectively, generally leaving roughly 12–15 inches, and in some cases up to 12–24 inches on suitable hollow or pithy stems.

How the garden should look

The goal is a managed, intentional spring garden, not a stripped one. Paths, edges, entries, and high-visibility areas can be kept neat, while planting interiors and less prominent zones retain more habitat structure.

In practice

- Open paths and entries first.
- Release emerging crowns where debris is smothering new growth.
- Redistribute excess leaves within the planting rather than removing them from site.
- Remove clearly diseased material and invasive seedlings.
- Avoid blanket shearing or cutting all perennial material to grade.

References

- Xerces Society. "Don't Spring into Garden Cleanup Too Soon."
- UNH Extension. "Leaving Leaves and Flower Stalks for Wildlife."
- NC State Extension. "Garden Cleanup for Pollinators: Trim Perennial Stems in Their First Winter."