

# LETTING YOUR GARDEN STAND TALL



STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHY  
**MELANIE REKOLA**

Aesthetic, environmental or functional, there are many reasons to let your garden stand tall this fall.

Instead of sanitizing the garden with a complete cut-back and clean-out, let's celebrate architectural value and those subtle hues of decay. Slow down and really look around to appreciate the understated allure in the many sumptuous shades of brown, gold and tan.

For many of us the garden season seems to end in September, but it really doesn't have to. Autumn's beauty is in more than colour-changing tree leaves, and winter's elegance is in more than just the evergreens. The time is now to consider creating fall and winter interest in your garden.

## GRASSES

Grasses are likely the first plant that comes to mind when considering fall and winter. Their feathery or dotted plumage is divine and a lot of colour pop can also be found in their fluffy foliage, even after the freeze. By varying your grass selections you will be rewarded with warm winter browns, golden tans and hints of copper. A few of my favourite grass plants for fall colour are Big Bluestem (*Andropogon gerardii*), Little Bluestem (*Schizachyrium scoparium*), Switchgrass (*Panicum virgatum*), Northern Sea Oat (*Chasmanthium latifolium*) and Maiden Grass "Ghana" (*Miscanthus sinensis Ghana*). *Continued on page 44*



## LASTING LEAVES

Many plants retain their dead foliage throughout fall and winter. Just as grasses do, other common garden perennials (such as the common Peony) sport varied shades of golden yellow and red-bronze. A characteristic known as marcescence, some deciduous trees (such as Beech and Oak) even retain their leaves all winter long. In the dead of winter when almost all deciduous trees are skeletonized, the coppery leaves of Beech are still clinging to their branches – a joyful sight to see.

## SEED HEADS

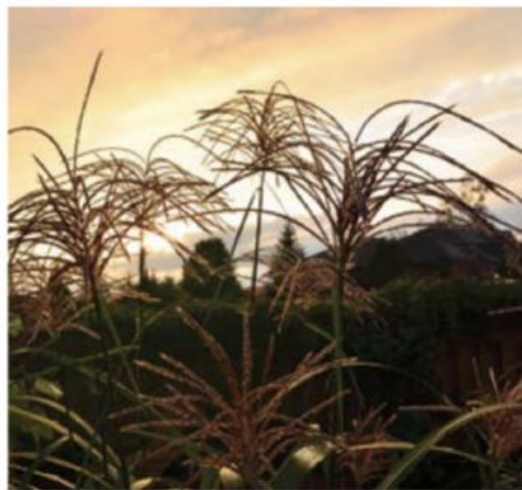
Seed heads add drama and contrast. Their often very dark brown and spikey kernels can appear jet black. I find this makes one take notice and appreciate all the exciting diversity of shape and texture provided by the natural world. When large perennials are left to stand with their sturdy stalks and branches, architectural interest is achieved. Giant Coneflower (*Rudbeckia maxima*), large Sedum varieties and Globe Thistle (*Echinops bannaticus*) top the list for plants with beautiful seed production. Seed heads left to ripen also provide a food source for many birds and other forms of wildlife.

## WILDLIFE

Leaving perennials to stand welcomes all kinds of exciting creatures. And a garden teeming with life adds a whole new dimension to its otherwise static state. Ground birds, such as the Mourning Dove, appreciate a refuge of thick cover. Furthermore, many beneficial insects, frogs and other wildlife hibernate in leaf litter so don't rake them out. Some of our native solitary bee species overwinter in hollow plant stems, so don't cut them down. You just might be "throwing out the baby with the bathwater," so it is said.

## GARDEN HEALTH

More than just for aesthetics, leaving perennials to stand actually improves a garden's health. Standing plants accumulate extra snow, which in turn insulates their roots during cold winter temperatures. When that snow melts it also adds extra moisture to the surrounding soil. Plus, the decaying leaves feed soil microbes, making for a healthier soil ecosystem on the whole. Exposure to a certain soil bacteria will make you healthier too. *Mycobacterium vaccae* acts as a natural antidepressant, activating brain cells that improve mood, increase serotonin levels, reduce anxiety and facilitate learning.



Perfect for the low maintenance gardener, by waiting to cut back your garden until springtime you can cross this chore off the fall to-do list. Then in wintertime, instead of a desolate, lifeless garden cut to the ground, you will enjoy exquisite frosty mornings where every leaf, stem and seed head is encircled with sparkling snow. You'll be captivated by the variance in heights, textures and forms. You may even see a blood-red cardinal pecking at your spent Black-Eyed Susan flowers. After seeing such a sight, can you imagine being without it? Leaving your landscape alone this autumn is really a win/win/win situation for the garden, the environment and you. **OH**

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