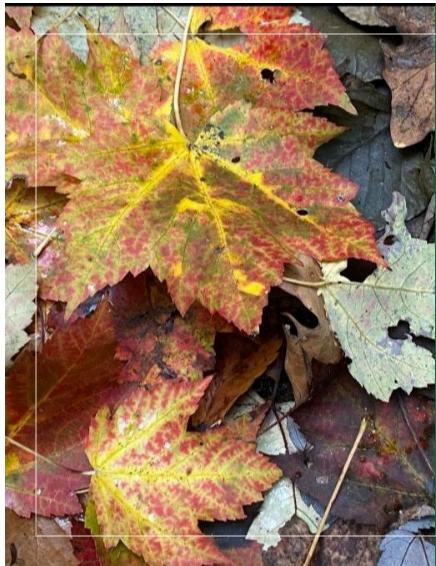


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Fall Quarterly 2024



Arlington Regional Master Naturalists

Notes on Nature

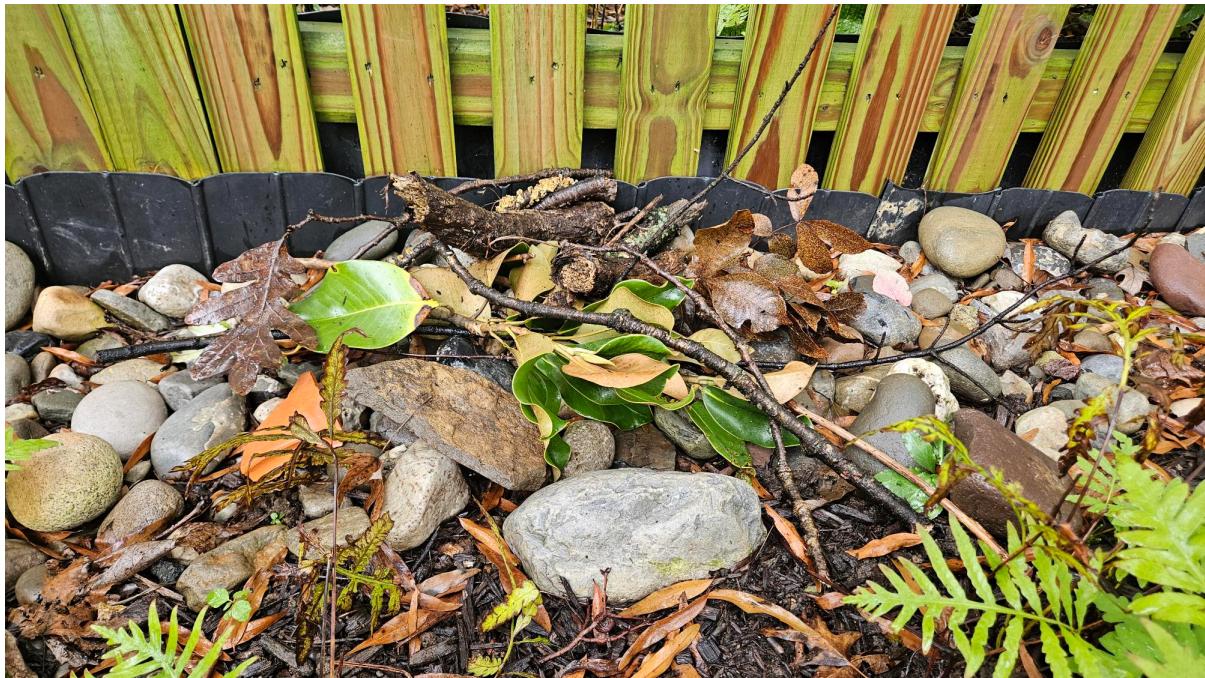
How To Winterize Your Garden and Provide More Native Habitat In The Process

With the shorter days and cooler temperatures, gardeners are beginning the process of fall cleanup in preparation for the coming winter months when their gardens will lie dormant awaiting the burst of spring growth. Now is a great time to divide and move plants, bring in tender non-native perennials and remove the stakes and temporary support structures that dot our gardens. It is also time to buy new native plants, bulbs, and seeds from the profusion of catalogs or at our local nurseries.

Many gardeners winterize by blowing leaves, cutting spent plants to the ground, and buying mulch to top dress their flower beds. The yard looks neat

and did, but it is now a wasteland for the critters who would call our gardens home. I did this year after year, priding myself on how manicured my lawn and gardens looked, not knowing that I was robbing the insects and other animals in my small oasis of the leaves, flower stalks, and spent blooms they need for habitat and food. Training to become a master naturalist and reading Doug Tallamy changed my perspective, and I hope to change yours.

Leave the Leaves: The New Mantra



Conventional wisdom now encourages us to leave the leaves rather than raking and bagging for either the landfill (horrible) or organic recycling (less bad). Don't want your lawn smothered in leaves? Rake them into your garden and foundation beds, which will create a natural mulch to suppress weeds plus help to fertilize the soil by feeding the micro-organisms living there, thereby creating healthy soil and more vigorous plants. Leaves also provide winter cover for pollinators such as butterflies and bees, overwintering birds and small mammals. According to the Xerces Society, (we are) "raking, mowing and blowing away a bit of nature that is essential to the survival of moths, butterflies, snails, spiders and dozens of arthropods". Many animals that live in the leaves support the birds, chipmunks, and amphibians that rely on these insects for food. Yet another option, for some of those leaves, is to compost them if you have space for a compost pile, and allow them to break down naturally. Leaf piles also can be tick habitats, so it's a good idea for kids and/or pets to avoid playing in them.

As much as possible, leave the spent flowers, especially on plants like echinacea, which provide food for the birds as they start their migrations. Ditto for the flower stalks, which often have insects such as bee larvae, overwintering inside them. If these need to be cut, wait for spring when temps are consistently above 50 degrees so that the insects in them have a chance to emerge. Dead stalks provide both bird nesting material and perches for birds; plus they provide wind protection from the cold. Pruned or fallen twigs and tree branches can be made into a brush pile (see below).

Brush Pile

As you prune trees and shrubs, create a brush pile --aka habitat pile --that will serve as a refuge for many creatures such as birds, small mammals and insects during the cold winter months. Place in an area of the garden that is well-lit by day, well drained, and, if possible, out of the wind, although it will provide a wind break to those seeking shelter. I have limited space so my brush pile will be small, but I will gradually add to it as branches fall and trees and shrubs are trimmed.

Lawn Care: The Holy Grail of American Yards

Lawns are food deserts that do not provide habitat or food for the insects and birds we value in our gardens. They have a high carbon footprint due to chemicals and equipment used to maintain them. Many homeowners apply fertilizer and herbicides on their lawns in the fall, which can impact insects such as lightning bugs and other organisms that live in the ground under this treated soil. Organizations like Audubon at Home encourage gardeners to stop this practice so that insects will thrive, and thusly so will the birds that feed on them. It really is okay to allow clover and dandelions to grow in your lawn. Both plants will be a vital food source for the native bees in early spring. In just one year of not treating my lawn with chemicals, I have seen more lightning bugs and insects of all sorts reappear in our garden – and, with the insects come the birds. Another suggestion is to decrease the size of your lawn and increase the size of your garden beds. I did this last year in the front yard and will be diminishing the grass in the backyard by more than half this fall. Pollinator beds of native plants are great choices, but it is not necessary to go 100 percent native – every little bit helps. For example, my garden is 70 percent native (no invasives!) and yet received the Audubon at Home Wildlife Sanctuary

New Plantings

Now is the prime time for gardeners to rehab their gardens with new plantings that they either buy or get from friends and neighbors. Consider using this time to remove non-native invasives from your property, such as English ivy, wisteria, butterfly bush, honeysuckle, autumn clematis, and liriope. Why? The seeds and berries of nonnatives do not properly feed our native insects and birds as the nutrients are all wrong. For example, most birds can eat one or two nandina berries, but too many are toxic to Cedar Waxwings. Also, when non-native berries or seeds are eaten by birds and other wildlife, they are spread into our parks and forests where they invasively crowd out the native flora. Use this time to replace these invasives with native plants. Two years ago, I removed eight nandina plants from along our driveway and replaced them with red chokeberries. These native shrubs now provide migrating birds the berries that have the higher fat content and lower sugar base that they need for their long and perilous trip. It is a fabulous sight to see cedar waxwings and other birds stripping the chokeberries off the bushes as they come through this area on their migration, and to know that I have helped provide them the nutrition they need to make their arduous journey. Many nurseries and catalogs are now carrying native herbaceous plants, shrubs and trees.

Water Source

Another item to consider is providing water for wildlife, not just during the summer but also during the winter, when the usual warm-weather water sources are dry or frozen over. There are inexpensive heaters one can add to bird baths, and some bird baths have an integrated heater and can be plugged in to keep the water from freezing. Although this isn't necessarily a part of winterizing your garden, it is a kind thing to do.

In Summary

This year, as we winterize our gardens, we can do so with an eye to providing shelter, food and water for the critters who share and enrich our world, thus taking our sterile yards and returning our small part of nature to more native habitat. And it's a great feeling to know that you've done your part to restore the harmony of the environment. If we all do what we can, even if it is a small change, collectively it will better our world.

-Photos and article by Debby Brown,
ARMN 2022



Analysis of a Sudden Branch Drop



There have been a number of incidents of large branches suddenly dropping from trees in the Washington, DC area this past summer, including one near the Capitol Building on July 10, that killed a woman. Another such incident occurred August 25, at Auburn Village Condominium in Alexandria, when a heavy branch dropped suddenly from a large Columnar Oak. No one was hurt and there was no damage. A few hours afterward, Virginia Tech Agriculture Extension Agent Kirsten Conrad and Tree Steward Dick Christenson examined the tree and the dropped branch. They found significant rot where the branch had broken away from the tree. (See photo above.)

This branch dropped suddenly on a quiet windless summer morning. There was no external stress – it broke and dropped because the rot within had so weakened it that it couldn't support itself. A neighbor saw the tree looking healthy one moment, and he returned just a bit later to find the branch lying broken on the ground.

Extension Agent Conrad determined that the internal rot was caused by poor pruning done some years ago.

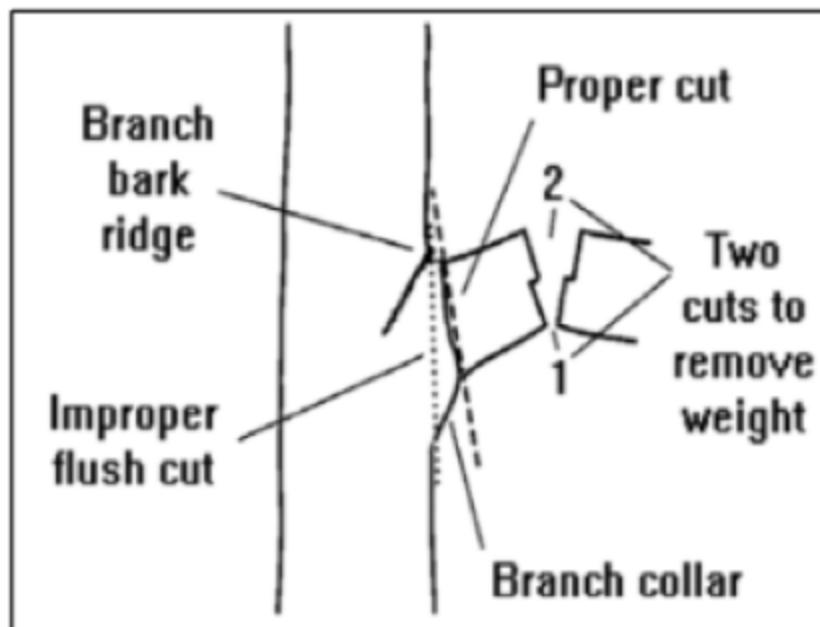
The photo on the right shows the place where a smaller branch was pruned off the larger branch. (See arrow.) This was probably done to prevent the smaller branch from growing over a nearby roof.



In the closeup photo at left, the arrow shows the stub of the small branch sticking out a few inches from the large branch. The small branch should have been cut off closer to the large branch, which would have allowed the tree to heal over the pruning wound, protecting the tree from the invading decay



Cut #1 is a shallow half-cut at the bottom of the branch that prevents the bark and tree flesh from stripping down the tree when the branch comes off. Cut #2 cuts downward, further out from the first cut -- this is the cut that



removes the bulk of the branch. Cut #3 is the one that's labelled "proper cut" in the diagram – this is the cut that must be precise. It starts slightly outside the branch bark ridge and cuts downward, angled slightly outward to avoid damaging the branch collar. This is the finishing cut, the one that ensures best healing of the wound. Note also the dotted line that is labelled "improper flush cut". If the branch is cut off flush with the bark, the cut won't heal properly. If you'd like to learn more, please check the references below.

Sudden branch drops don't always have the same cause, and sometimes it's

hard to discern any cause -- it's a mystery. But in this case we can clearly see the cause: A small branch was cut off too far away from the branch collar of the

large branch, so the cut never sealed over. Decay organisms infected the heartwood, and the large branch rotted, weakened, and fell. This could have been prevented by proper pruning.

References:

[A Guide to Successful Pruning, Pruning Deciduous Trees](#)

[A Guide to Successful Pruning, Pruning Evergreen Trees](#)

[Pruning Trees Nebraska Forest Service](#)

-Article by:

Kirsten Conrad, the Virginia Cooperative Extension Agriculture/Natural Resources Agent for Arlington and Alexandria and

Dick Christenson, a member of Tree Stewards of Arlington/Alexandria.

-Photos by Dick Christenson

Virginia Native Plant Society Hosts Annual Meeting

Members of the Arlington Regional Master Naturalists (ARMN) gathered near Harrisonburg with other native plant lovers this past September for the annual meeting of the Virginia Native Plant Society. The meeting offered a wonderful opportunity to connect with experts in the field and like-minded nature lovers.

ARMN members Jackie Rivas, Susan Berry, Lori Bowes, Margaret Chatham, and Sara Roth attended the annual meeting of the Virginia Native Plant Society in Harrisonburg, Virginia, September 20-22, 2024. (See photo below).



The weekend included a Friday night presentation by Dr. Andrea Weeks of George Mason University on “Lena Artz in the Massanuttens – Her contributions to Southeastern U.S. Botany.”

Participants also heard from Dr. Iara Lacher, Research Associate at the Smithsonian Conservation Biology Institute, on “Species Range Maps – how science and technology shape our understanding of nativity and conservation action.”

In addition, attendees participates in expert-led field trips on Saturday and Sunday to botanically significant properties in the vicinity. These included

Reddish Knob, near the border of Virginia and West Virginia; Sister Knob, in Bath County; Maple Flat Ponds in the George Washington/Jefferson National Forest; and Cowbane Prairie Natural Area Preserve. On Saturday evening, bluegrass lovers had a chance to kick up their heels to some live entertainment.

-Article and photo by Jackie Rivas, ARMN

Fall Bird Migration is Underway

Arlington County is located along a major migratory route known as the Atlantic Flyway, making it a great spot for observing migratory birds. Each year, a variety of bird species pass through or temporarily reside in the county during their spring and fall migrations. The [BirdCast website](#) is a great resource to track the movement of migrating birds across nearby counties.

Fall migration takes place from August to November. Among the birds to keep an eye out for are:

Raptors: Sharp-shinned Hawks and Cooper's Hawks are commonly seen during their southward migration.

Songbirds: Various sparrows, including the White-throated Sparrow and Song Sparrow, are commonly seen during the fall.

Thrushes: Species like the American Robin and Swainson's Thrush are more prevalent during this period.



You might see a White-throated Sparrow in our area during fall migration.

Photo by ARMN Manoma

Sirisena.

As winter winds down you can keep a look out for birds making their spring migration, which occurs from March to June. Here are some you might see:

Warblers: Many species of warblers, like the Yellow-rumped Warbler and Black-throated Blue Warbler, are frequently seen in the forests and wooded areas.

Hawks: Species like the Broad-winged Hawk and Red-shouldered Hawk pass through during the spring, sometimes gathering in large numbers.

Swallows: Tree Swallows and Barn Swallows can often be spotted near water bodies.

Waterfowl: Canada Geese, Mallards, and other ducks pass through or stop at local ponds and wetlands.

If you're lucky, you'll see the Wilson's Warbler (right) and the Prairie Warbler (below) during spring migration.

Photos by ARMN Manoma Sirisena.



Most birds migrate at night, so turning off outside lights in the evening can

help prevent birds from getting confused and disoriented. Other ways to help migrating birds are to plant native plants that fuel their journey, reduce pesticide use, and use window decals to prevent building strikes.

If you'd like to go birdwatching, here are some notable birdwatching spots in Arlington County:

Theodore Roosevelt Island: Although technically it is in Washington, D.C., this is a great location for spotting migratory warblers and other songbirds.

Long Branch Nature Center: Known for its diversity of bird species, particularly during migration periods.

Potomac Overlook Regional Park: Offers good vantage points for observing raptors and woodland birds.

Fort C.F. Smith Park: Offers a beautiful 19-acre site that includes a lush tree canopy, and open meadow. It is a surprisingly birdy place.

If you are birdwatching in Arlington County this fall/winter, local birdwatching groups often hold events or provide updated information on which species are being seen during the migration periods. Some suggestions:

For free bird walks from the Northern Virginia Bird Alliance click [here](#)
The Northern Virginia Bird Club also offers [free bird walks](#)

New Study on Bird Migration and Climate Change

It now appears that climate change is having an effect on bird migration more so than what was previously realized. A new study from researchers at the Smithsonian's National Zoo and Conservation Biology Institute found that environmental conditions in the winter homes of migratory birds affect their ability to survive spring migration and the breeding season.

The study, published in [Current Biology](#), marks the first time researchers have linked winter conditions with migration survival. Analysis of the data for both the Kirtland's Warbler and the Black-throated Blue Warbler revealed reduced rainfall and diminished vegetative productivity in the birds' Caribbean non-breeding habitats resulted in fewer birds surviving spring migration. For Kirtland's Warblers, poor quality winter habitat also reduced survival in the subsequent breeding season.

The Caribbean is expected to get drier over the next few decades due to climate change, suggesting that migratory bird species such as these warblers could face greater challenges.

-Article by Anna Dixon, ARMN

Join the Audubon Christmas Bird Count

Gift yourself an experience this December and participate in the [Christmas Bird Count](#) (CBC). It's great way to take part in one the longest running wildlife censuses in the world. The CBC began on Christmas day in 1900 as a way to promote conservation by counting, rather than hunting, birds. This year, between December 14, 2024 and January 5, 2025 birders are getting up early across the entire Western hemisphere to count birds for the Audubon CBC.

Each individual count takes place in a 15-mile-wide circle and is led by a compiler responsible for organizing volunteers and submitting observations directly to Audubon. Within each circle, participants tally all birds seen or heard that day—not just the species but total numbers to provide a clear idea of the health of that particular population. While birds are counted during a 24-hour period, actual outings typically last from 8am-12pm.

The Carolina Wren is one bird species spotted by participants in the 2023 Manassas-Bull Run Christmas Bird Count.

Photo: Jack Bulmer, Pixabay



Participation is free and birders of all levels are welcomed to join a group. Each 15-mile circle is divided into sectors. Each circle has a compiler. The circle compiler is supported by sector leads, who are assigned to part of a circle. In our

area, count circle areas are Fort Belvoir, Washington, D.C. with overlap into Virginia (McLean area) and Manassas-Bull Run. Consider choosing a circle near

you and be part of the count! For more information contact:

Manassas-Bull Run – Phil Silas – epsdcva@aol.com

DC Count Circle - Larry Cartwright – prowarbler@verizon.net

Fort Belvoir - Kurt Gaskill – kurtcapt87@verizon.net

Seneca MD/VA – Jim Nelson – kingfishers2@verizon.net. (includes Great Falls Park)

-Article by Colt Gregory

Frequently asked questions

Audubon's Christmas Bird Count takes place in over 20 countries in the Western hemisphere! It is an early-winter bird census, where thousands of volunteers across the U.S., Canada (where Audubon partners with Birds Canada), and many countries in the Western Hemisphere go out over a 24-hour period on one calendar day to count birds.

When does the Christmas Bird Count happen?

All Christmas Bird Counts are conducted between December 14 to January 5, inclusive dates, every year. Each circle compiler will choose a single calendar day within those dates and your CBC birding is done on only one calendar day for each circle.

Is participation in the CBC free?

Yes, participation is free. However, you will need to provide your own transportation, binoculars and weather appropriate clothing.

How does participation work?

There is a specific methodology to the CBC, and all participants must make arrangements to participate in advance with the circle compiler but the CBC is open to all!

Each count takes place in an established 15-mile diameter circle, and is organized by a count compiler. Count volunteers follow specified routes through the designated circle, counting every bird they see or hear all day. It's not just a species tally—all birds are counted all day, giving an indication of the total number of birds in the circle that day.

Birders of all skill sets are involved in the CBC. If you are a beginning birder, your compiler will pair you with an expert initially. If your home is within the boundaries of a CBC circle, then you can stay at home and report the birds that visit your feeder on count day as long as you have made prior arrangement with the count compiler.

Can I just conduct my own CBC and send you my data?

No. Since each CBC is a real census, effort data are collected as well as bird numbers, and since the 15-mile diameter circle contains a lot of area to be covered, single-observer counts (except in unusual circumstances) are not allowed.

Why do some Christmas Bird Count circles not accept additional participants?

Accepting additional participants is the individual decision of each circle compiler and is based on a number of factors, including the number of participants already committed to the count, potential pre-arranged access to restricted areas, the amount of area already covered, and the compiler's available time.

What is the role of a participant?

As a CBC participant, you need to coordinate with your local compiler in advance of the count date. Next, follow the instructions from the compiler and learn what data to collect. Go out on count day to your assigned location and document your observations. Finally submit your data to your compiler in a timely manner.

How is data from the Christmas Bird Count used?

CBC data has been used in hundreds of analyses, peer-reviewed publications, and government reports over the decades. Yearly summaries of CBC data submitted by each circle compiler can be [found through this page](#). Audubon's quantitative ecologist updates the CBC Population Trends periodically which [can be viewed and downloaded from this page](#).

-Article by Colt Gregory, ARMN

Spread Joy This Holiday Season and Support the Arlington Regional Master Naturalists Program

We need you! When you donate you will support our efforts to:

- Restore native habitats at over 55 sites in northern Virginia.
- Develop and maintain demonstration native plant gardens to showcase the beauty and benefits of native plants.
- Help homeowners create and nurture wildlife sanctuaries through the Northern Virginia Bird Alliance Wildlife Sanctuary program.
- Lead nature education programs for adults and young people.
- Monitor stream health in Arlington and Fairfax counties.
- Collect wild seeds and propagate and maintain plants in conjunction with native plant nurseries.
- Help inspire an awareness of and appreciation for biodiversity in the Arlington/Alexandria/Falls Church region.
- Lead citizen science projects including the City Nature Challenge, and Phenology monitoring.

Donations are tax deductible. ARMN is a non-profit, tax-exempt, 501(c)(3) organization.

Please click [here](#) to donate via PayPal.

You may also mail your donation check made out to ARMN Treasurer:

ARMN Treasurer
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Arlington VA 22207

Thank you for supporting the Arlington Regional Master Naturalists program!



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