At the first signs of spring local gardeners feel an almost gravitational pull outside. Finally free from the shackles of winter, we rush to our veggie plots and perennial beds to tidy up and prepare the soil for new plantings. However, resisting the urge to immediately manicure garden beds can have big benefits for local wildlife.

Delaying spring cleanup provides shelter for overwintering insects and a food supply for returning song birds. The erratic temperature changes of March and early April can be especially hard on these animals if they do not have adequate shelter. Many species of butterflies and beneficial garden bugs overwinter among dead leaves, branches, and stems. Many native bees, which provide incredibly important pollination services, nest in the hollow cavities of stems. Keeping this dead plant material in place for the beginning of spring allows dormant insects time to emerge.

A late April mowing of last year's perennial grasses and wildflowers in the Pollinator Garden at the Louise Mueller Preserve. A hedge trimmer allows GLT staff to cut the stems high to allow for even more habitat.

This figure illustrates the general emergence times of east coast native bees in relation to fruit tree blooms. Delay garden cleanup to late April, even up to mid-May, to maximize bee nesting habitat in your garden.
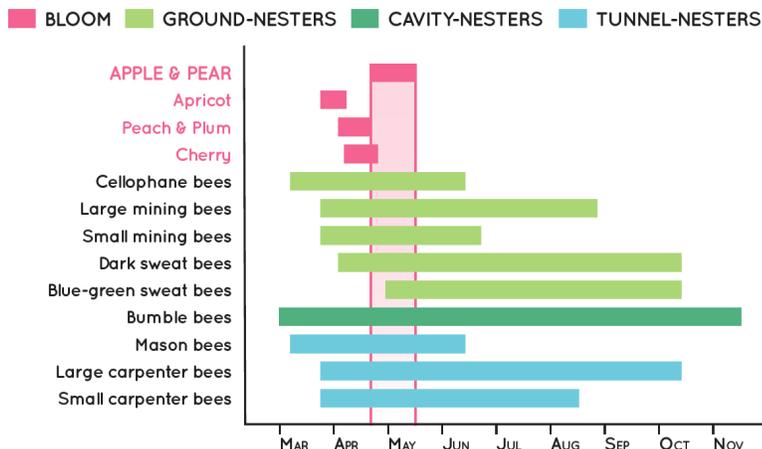
Keeping last year's debris in the garden may not be practical for all locations, but garden procrastinators should be reassured that their negligence may actually benefit the environment and yield more beautiful birds, bees, and butterflies. Holding off on cleanup may be the best thing you can do for your garden. A messy garden is almost always full of life!

Source: Park, M. et al. 2015. *Wild Pollinators of Eastern Apple Orchards and How to Conserve Them.*