Garden Logue: February 2006 William Moss

I do not clear my garden in late autumn. Mind you, I always keep it neat and healthy by taking out diseased plants and excessive debris, but I do not remove my senesced perennials and annuals until late winter. This decision is based on scientific principles and strong intuition. The rationales may not be textbook, but the results work for me.

A few seasons ago before my usual fall clearing, I asked myself, "How can these dying stalks of okra, asters, and lilies (never tomatoes, they are too messy) help my garden and the local environment?" The answers were overwhelming in favor of leaving the plants.

Stalks and leaves of late season plants are deep green and succulent as winter approaches. By springtime they are lighter in mass and color. Stout, green lily stems poking out of the ground in November become like pale gray soda straws by March. The loss mass and color represents nutrients leached back into my garden. Rather than going to enrich the compost pile (or worse case scenario, to rot in a landfill) those nutrients stay put and return to the soil from whence they came.

Leaving last year's plants in the soil also allows the fine roots to decompose, which increases the organic matter in the soil. This supplies food for beneficial bacteria and detritivores. Those microscopic guys are a major factor in growing healthy, bountiful plants.

The spent plants provide physical protection as well. They can serve as a windbreak for evergreens and gardeners, especially if positioned on the northern and western sides. They can act as natural mulch, covering the ground and preventing the soil from heaving and thawing. And, even as they breakdown, the roots of senesced plants continue to anchor the soil and reduce erosion from winter rains.

I have yet to test this next hypothesis with the scientific method, but I believe that the stems can act as radiators for the soil. They seem to conduct the sun's heat into the earth and help moderate the temps. Observing the emergence of spring bulbs in covered areas versus exposed areas leads me to this conclusion. There is definitely a microclimate effect by some means.

Environmentally, last year's plants provide cover and food for wildlife. I am always surprised at the number of birds in our community garden. Even in the middle of winter doves, sandpiper-like avians, sparrows, and starlings are present in large numbers. The sparrows perch on sunflower heads, picking out

every tasty seed. The doves congregate in untidy gardens, perhaps foraging or simply seeking shelter. I rarely see any of these birds in the cleared, exposed plots.

I'm sure some egghead scientist can come up with a list of counterpoints to all my arguments and observations. That's okay. Because the number one reason I leave okra stalks, lily stems, hellebore leaves, coneflowers heads, and Indian grass blades is to remind me that the garden is alive and fertile. In the midst of winter's grip gardeners can become despondent. The graying stems of summer along with the eternal evergreens and precocious snowdrops remind me how alive and vivid the space will be in a few short months. So until the crocus and the winter aconite provide me with more colorful inspiration, my stalks will stand.