



*Left, Lauren's wildlife-habitat gardens, St. Julian's Crossing, in spring 2018  
Right, Milkweed Assassin Bug (Zelus longipes), a beneficial garden predator, feeding on a fly*

## THINK ABOUT GARDEN'S WILDLIFE BEFORE TACKLING 'DEAD' PLANTS

By Lauren J. Simpson

[St. Julian's Crossing Wildlife Habitat](#)

This was the first deep, extended freeze since I created our wildlife-habitat gardens. While I covered less-established plants (about 30% of the garden), I left most uncovered.

Like many, we lost most plants' surface structures. However, many of our established, native plants appear to have survived, which I can tell from snapping twigs and seeing green, or seeing green rosettes at the ground below dead stalks. Time will tell.

Here are some tips on how to handle the garden after a deep freeze.

- This terrific [Jessica Walliser article](#) explains how to prepare gardens for spring planting without harming wildlife, particularly insects—including how to know when the right time for spring pruning is (generally, at least seven consecutive days with temperatures over 50°F).
- Resist the temptation immediately to cut back freeze-damaged plants with pithy or hollow stems. Some of our tiny native bees and other beneficial insects overwinter or create nests inside these. If we cut back/compost those stems, we might be discarding beneficial insect larvae or adults still in diapause (the insect equivalent of hibernation) inside.
- If you do cut the stems back earlier, then simply pile them outside for a few weeks, so that any little creatures inside can still emerge.
- Leave in place more than just the stems. Dead plant matter. . .
  1. shelters all kinds of critters, which is essential until it's warmer.
  2. keeps seeds available for birds.
  3. helps protect tender seedling shoots if there is another freeze.
- When it's finally safe to prune, trim back dead parts to promote new growth. Leave about a foot of those stems in place, however. This gives nesting sites for the next generation of beneficial bees and wasps, and those stems will quickly be hidden by new growth anyway.
- Look for insect life in or on plant stems and leaves, to ensure that you're not composting insects in their various life stages. For example, certain moth and butterfly species



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pupate overwinter either on stems or curled up in leaves. Take the time to examine things to ensure that pupae aren't being discarded. This is worth the additional time.

You should know in a few weeks whether your plant made it through the freeze, in whole or in part. For woody-stemmed plants, snap off twigs to see if they're still green inside (a sign of life) and look for new growth on twigs and stems. For forbs (non-woody flowering plants) and vines, a couple of weeks should reveal which parts are alive or dead; you should also monitor for new growth. When in doubt, don't remove a perennial until you're certain that the root is dead. FYI, if you planted deep-rooted, native prairie plants, chances are that the roots are alive still.

Here is a [short, helpful video](#) on monitoring plants after a freeze.