



DIGGIN' IT
 BY PHAIDRA YUNKER
 Nothing works

Recently, my phone has been buzzing. Not with emergencies, not with plant ID questions, but with a very specific kind of spring fever: "Is it time to clean up the yard yet?" The calendar says April, the sun feels warmer and hardware stores have rolled out displays of rakes, soil, seeds and optimism. I understand the temptation. After a long winter, folks are desperate to do something (anything!) in their yard.

Before you start hauling leaves to the curb, let me offer a simple rule of thumb: if you still need a coat to walk outside, your pollinators still need their shelter.

What looks like a mess to us is, in fact, the only insulation many insects have left. Those leaves matted against the fence line are where butterflies, moths, beetles and fireflies spent the winter. They're still in there, tucked between the layers like tiny tenants waiting for the heat to turn on. The hollow stems you're itching to cut down are housing native bees that haven't yet emerged. These insects don't operate on the same schedule we do. They don't care that the snow melted or that you're tired of looking at last year's debris. They wait for consistency, something North Dakota spring is famously bad at providing.

People ask how they're supposed to know when it's safe to clean up. The answer is not the date on the calendar or the temperature on a single afternoon: the answer is insects. When you see them consistently buzzing around (not one confused fly that woke up too early, but real, steady activity) that's your signal. Until then, the leaves and stems are doing more good on the ground than in a yard waste bag.

There are other indicators. Soil temperature is one of them. Most pollinators won't emerge until the soil reaches the mid-50s, and soil warms slowly, far more slowly than the air. It usually takes multiple days of highs in the 60s and 70s (plus nights that stay above freezing) before the ground responds. Another cue is the presence of early bloomers. When you start seeing dandelions popping open, violets creeping out from under the leaf litter and willows shaking out their catkins, that's nature's way of saying the pollinators are waking up and the buffet is officially open.

While we're talking about timing, let's talk about fruit trees. Apples, plums and cherries (all the things we look forward to in late summer) bloom early. Their flowers open long before the rest of the garden has fully woken up, and they rely on pollinators being awake and active at exactly the right moment. If you clean too early and remove insects that would have pollinated those blossoms, you're not just tidying the yard, you're reducing your fall harvest. A fruit tree in full bloom without pollinators is just a pretty decoration. A fruit tree with pollinators is a pantry.

The benefits of waiting don't stop with

insects. Leaf litter, for all its bad reputation, is one of the best soil amendments you can get for free. As it breaks down, it feeds the soil, improves structure, increases organic matter and helps retain moisture. It's slow-release fertilizer delivered by nature, no spreader required. When we rush to remove every scrap of organic matter, we're not just cleaning, we're interrupting a natural cycle that's been feeding the soil for millennia.

I know some folks worry that leaving the "mess" makes their yard look neglected. But a too-clean yard in early April is a yard that's been stripped of its workforce. Pollinators aren't decorative. They're essential. They're the reason your tomatoes set fruit, your vines produce cucumbers and your apple trees bear more than blossoms. More pollinators mean better gardens, fuller harvests and healthier landscapes. Every butterfly you spare now is one more drifting through your yard in July. Every bee that survives the spring is one more visiting your squash blossoms in August. When you clean too early, you're not just tidying, you're reducing your future yield.

Those dead leaves and stems create pockets of warmth and moisture that help overwintering insects survive the rollercoaster of early spring. Without that protection, many species simply don't make it. And the ones that do survive are often weakened, emerging later and in smaller numbers. That means fewer bees visiting your apple blossoms, fewer butterflies drifting through your yard, and fewer beneficial insects patrolling your garden for pests. The "mess" you see now is the foundation of the ecosystem you'll rely on all summer.

Let's be honest, our spring weather is not to be trusted. We get one warm week, and then a freeze arrives just to remind us who's in charge. Pollinators know better than to fall for that trick. They wait for the soil to warm, for the nights to stop dipping below freezing, for the world outside to stop behaving like a malfunctioning thermostat. If you remove their shelter now, you're exposing them to the same meteorological mood swings that make the rest of us question why we live here.

So this year, try something radical: nothing.

Leave the leaves where they are. Let the stems stand a little longer. Give insects time to wake up on their own schedule. When you finally hear that low hum of life returning to the yard, that's your cue. Not before.

Gardening is a partnership, even if we like to think we're the ones in charge. The truth is that our gardens depend on creatures most of us never see and rarely think about until they're gone. Waiting a few extra weeks before cleaning up isn't laziness: it's stewardship.

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BACK IN THE DAY

Underwood

COMPILED BY SHELLY WALLACE

from the Files of the Central McLean News Journal

20 years ago, April 2006

Members of the Underwood Area Economic Development Corporations Daycare Committee say everything is on track to open the Comet Kids Childcare Center in Underwood by September. The childcare center will be in the old clinic building on Lincoln Avenue according to committee members Doreen Schaff, Kellie Weisenburger and Katie Heger.

Harvey Schneider of Toman Engineering was at the city commission meeting to give estimates he had prepared for the Repnow-Mees paving project, as well as a cost for development of the Westridge Addition lots.

Underwood Area Development Director Brian Ash said that the housing authority is working to purchase the Hillside Apartments and keep it in the low-income level.

Kayla Baumann and Chad Oberlander, both of Washburn, announce their forthcoming marriage.

Jessica Rink and Sgt. Joel S. Watts will wed April 15 in Grand Forks.

Underwood-Turtle Lake Mercer's Ed Cullum's first place finish in the long jump, second place in the 400 meter run, and two second place finishes from Rhett Nostdahl gave the Comets a boost in their first track meet of the year, as the U-TL-M Comets placed fourth out of the 12 teams participating at the Hazen Early Bird meet.

Underwood Park Board member Myron Schell was at the Underwood City Commission meeting on Monday night, and his report on the swimming pool's status was not good news. The list of needs was long and costly. The park board would like to put a general obligation bond to make the repairs on the June ballot and ask for a mill levy increase to support the park board.

The first draft of the Home Rule Charter, which would implement a city sales tax in Underwood if approved by the voters, was presented to the city commission at the Monday night meeting. Charters from around the state were compared to come up with the first draft. The issue will appear on the June ballot.

30 years ago, April 1996

Medical services will be expanding in Underwood this summer. Medcenter One Health Systems has plans to build a new clinic, which will include additional services, according to Nurse Practitioner Deb Barber. Barber has been providing services at the present Underwood Clinic daily for several months, dividing her time between the Underwood and Washburn clinics.

Highway 83 may be bumped up to 65 mph. The North Dakota Department of Transportation is planning for hearings in May about raising the speed limit from 55 mph to 65 mph on U.S.

Highway 83, as well as U.S. Highway 2. The DOT will also consider raising the Interstate speed from 65 to 70 mph.

Rev. Tom Puffe began serving the congregation at St. John's Lutheran Church in Underwood as a vacancy pastor in December. On March 31, he was officially installed as pastor.

40 years ago, April 1986

Riverdale appointed Bryan Grondahl chairman of a committee to frame a home rule charter for the city. Other members of the committee are Linda Swatfager, Kim McGregor, Kenneth Klamm and Richard Depuy.

The Underwood Drama Club presented two one-act plays under the direction of Shelly Hoff. The cast for "The Ghost at Punkin Holler" included Shawn Auck, Kari Larson, Michelle Hummel, Joel Koenig, Toni Sayler, Becki Anderson, Becky Brockel, Charles Kranz and Jim LeRoy. The cast for "Sure as You're Born" included Heidi Olson, Kristie Schafer, Shean Benzmilller, Brook Paulson, Clint Erhardt, Tami Landenberger and Bill Dzuik.

50 years ago, April 1976

Steady progress is being made on construction of the giant 1,000-megawatt power generating station south of Underwood. The project, being built by Cooperative Power Association of Minneapolis and United Power Cooperative of Elk River, Minn., is far from its completion date of late 1979, but steel at the plant site is slowly going up and equipment contracts are being let.

Residents of Underwood go to the polls April 6 to select two aldermen and a president of the city commission. Incumbent president, Max Guenther, is running unopposed. Incumbent commissioners Lester Zietz and Duane Schuh are running for re-election. Three residents are challenging for commission seats. They are Jay Snyder, Charles Tauer and Don Schell.

60 years ago, April 1966

Mrs. Rose Liebel took over the operation of the Hotel Underwood last week, when Mr. and Mrs. James Tillema relinquished their contract.

Ninety-six voters in the old Victoria School District went to the polls for last Friday's special school election to cast their ballots on the question of whether or not the Coleharbor School should be closed and the pupils transported to Underwood. 87 voters cast a no vote, while only nine voted yes to close it.

Fred Eman was re-elected chief of the Underwood Fire Department at their annual meeting. Duane Fischer was elected assistant chief; Leo Strecker, secretary/treasurer; and Harold Lutz, rural secretary. Mr. Eman is starting

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Central McLean
News-Journal

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Published every Thursday by Nordak North Publishing., P.O. Box 309, 59 North Main, Garrison, ND 58540-0309. Periodical postage paid at Garrison, ND. For more information or for a subscription, write Central McLean News-Journal, P.O. Box 573, Underwood, ND 58576.
 POSTMASTER: Send address changes to Central McLean News-Journal, P.O. Box 573, Underwood, ND 58576.

Deadlines
 3 p.m. Monday – classifieds
 10 a.m. Tuesday – advertisements, public notices, news and area announcements

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