

*When one tugs at a single thing in nature, he finds it attached to the rest of the world.* John Muir



## **TERRABYTE 06.06 – CLEAN GARDEN, DEAD PLANTS**

"I loooooovvvvve a "clean" look," coos my most recent consultation client as we stroll through her garden, "but, why can't I get anything to grow here?" Hmmm. I think, well honi, your garden is dead because your earth is dead. But what I say is something more tactful like, "Well, here you have a fertility problem, largely due to the fact that the place is devoid of leaf litter." In other words, your garden is just too CLEAN to be healthy.

Personally, I think the most pressing attitude that needs to be adjusted in the move toward a more healthy, natural environment is the "CLEAN" earth aesthetic. I don't know where this aesthetic has come from, except that maybe people are translating their desire for cleanliness INSIDE their house out into their gardens. If we vacuum inside, then shouldn't we vacuum or blow outside and make the ground nice and clean? Doesn't that make the plants look so nice – little stems and leaves stretching up out of bare earth?

When I encounter this phenomenon (in just about every neighborhood in this city), I can't help thinking about all of the influences that conspire to keep the bare earth aesthetic *en vogue* – landscape designers who come from floral design or hair styling backgrounds with little or no understanding of soil; uninformed homeowners who think we Los Angelenos live in a desert (desert soil is bare, right?); and, worst of all, garden janitors who mow, blow, and go. The dirty truth is that leaf litter and organic/inorganic groundcover is really the skin of a garden. As in humans, if you destroy the skin, the system suffers and fails very quickly. Yes, a messy garden is a LIVING garden.

When the ground is not covered, plants are unable to properly develop their immune systems; they struggle to stay hydrated because water evaporates quickly from the uncovered soil; they struggle for nutrients and easily become dependent on chemical fertilizers (because there is no organic matter breaking down and becoming healthy food for the soil); and they suffer more from temperature swings because there is nothing insulating or cooling the soil surface. Organic or inorganic mulch, such as leaf litter, wood chips, gravel, or grass clippings provides a cover for the earth and allows the natural processes of decay and decomposition to release nutrients back into the soil, feeding the plants, and

