

Leave the Leaves

Let Nature Do the Work



Picture this: it's a crisp, clear fall day. You head outside with your mug of hot apple cider to enjoy the beautiful weather and watch the leaves fall gently from the trees. Suddenly, the idyll is destroyed by the droning of leaf blowers. You head back indoors. Maybe you should put down that mug and get to work raking and bagging the leaves in your own yard. Or should you? Wouldn't you rather save your back, your hands, and your hearing and go do something fun instead? You can, and not feel guilty about it. Leave the leaves in your yard and experience the benefits leaf litter provides for your lawn, garden, and

wildlife.

Enrich Your Soil, Garden, and Lawn

Raking and bagging your leaves is not only a waste of time, it's a waste of money. In forests where leaves are left where they land, the fertile soil teems with beneficial microbes, fungi, and bacteria. Decomposing leaves help create a rich organic topsoil. You won't need to waste money on artificial fertilizers or compost to replenish your soil and lawn in the spring when you have a free, nitrogen-rich source dropping from the trees every year. If you love to garden, but hate weeding, leaves are your best friend. A healthy layer left on garden beds reduces weeds and keeps the soil moist for the plants you do want. Just be sure not to layer them too heavily on top of your plants. Place shredded leaves in sensitive areas instead. By "bagging" the leaf bags, you will save more than time and money for yourself; you'd also be conserving resources by lessening the need for yard waste collection by gas-guzzling waste trucks, and you'd reduce the energy needed to process this waste at a landfill or composting facility.



<http://fresh-basil.com/>

Let Nature Break It Down

If you are worried about your yard looking messy with all of those leaves or about smothering your grass, here are some tips to help you manage. Using a mulching mower over your lawn can help break down the leaves without hurting your grass. If you have the space though, it's good to



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keep leaves whole, as they provide a better habitat for wildlife. You can also pile leaves high on your garden beds and loosen them periodically with a hand rake to ensure moisture spreads through the pile. Let them overwinter and in the spring, *voila*, you have rich compost already in place.

Leaves make better mulch for some trees and gardens than shredded hardwood. Leaf litter around your trees supports beneficial microorganisms that help protect your trees by producing antifungal agents that attack disease organisms. As microorganisms break down leaves, they extract nutrients

and water that can be used by the tree. Azaleas, blueberries, and other plants that thrive in acidic soil can be damaged from too much hardwood mulch, but benefit from pine and oak leaf litter, which lower the pH of the soil.

The Birds and the Bees...and Caterpillars, Fireflies, Spiders, Toads...

Thousands of species of bugs, butterflies, moths, and other creatures in the Mid-Atlantic area overwinter in leaf litter. Removing the leaves from your yard in the fall takes away an important habitat for the larvae that hatch in the spring. It also eliminates an important food source for birds in the area. If you want your flowers and vegetables to thrive in the spring and summer, keep the leaves so that the future pollinators have a place to grow. Leaf litter also provides material for birds to build their nests and acts as a good hiding place for small mammals. You can do your part to support species diversity by doing absolutely nothing!



If You Still Want to Get Rid of the Leaves

Please do it responsibly. Keep them out of storm drains and waterways. Don't burn them. Place them in the appropriate collection bags for your county or municipality. Consider searching for a "Rake and Take" program, such as the one offered by the Howard County Master Gardeners. These programs will find and match those who want to get rid of leaves with those who need leaves for their compost piles.

Visit the websites below for more information

- GSFC Environmental Bulletin: "A Homeowner's Guide to Managing Leaves"
<http://code250.gsfc.nasa.gov/environmental/outreach.cfm>
- <http://www.restoringthelandscape.com/2010/10/leave-leaves.html>
- <http://www.ecosystemgardening.com/life-in-the-leaf-litter-dont-throw-a-good-thing-away.html>
- Howard County's "Rake and Take" program:
<http://mastergardener.umd.edu/local/Howard/community%20act/Rake.cfm>

