

Don't Let Them Leave!

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What would a New England autumn be without its crisp, clear weather and bounty of crunchy, colorful leaves? As lovely as they are to look at, many a homeowner probably wishes they weren't quite so plentiful after a long day of raking. On the positive side, a half hour of raking uses up about 150 calories according to the American Council of Fitness and Nutrition. I remember that back when I was a kid we used to rake the leaves into a big pile by the curb and burn them. Once this practice was brought to a halt, folks began stuffing leaves into large plastic bags so they could be carted off to the local landfill. As society looks to reduce its ecological footprint, many people are realizing the wealth bestowed upon them by the forested parts of the landscape.

When you think about it, leaves are quite wondrous. They peek out each spring bringing lush, green, new life to a winter weary world; they provide shade, shelter and food for nature's creatures; they cool our homes and yard; they manufacture the very life-giving substances needed to sustain themselves, and they exit with a bang of color rivaling any man-made art form. And what do we do to show our appreciation? We moan and grumble and stuff them into bags! It's time we all put this valuable resource to work.

Leaves can reduce your purchases of soil amendments. They can be used to fertilize plants. Typically, leaves contain 50 percent or more of the nutrients a plant takes up over the growing season. These nutrient elements are slowly released as the leaves decompose. Leaves can be incorporated into the soil to increase organic matter levels and reap associated benefits, and leaves are a free mulch material. Using your leaves keeps them out of already overburdened landfills and may reduce municipal expenses allocated for collection and management of yard wastes.

Of course there are limits to the amount of leaves an individual homeowner can process and use. An acre of forest may drop up to 2 tons of leaves each year! Do consider both time and space considerations when deciding on the best way to tackle the leaves landing in your yard.

What options are there for dealing with leaves? An easy one if part of your yard is wooded is simply to rake the leaves into this area and distribute them over the forest floor. As long as the depth is not excessive, native plants will continue to flourish. A second option is to create a holding pen and fill it with leaves letting nature takes its course. Each year the bottom layer of leaf mold can be scooped up and used in garden beds. While this pile will appear quite bulky



Photo by Dawn Pettinelli.

at first, it slowly decomposes to about half its original volume. A tarp with weighted corners can be placed over the leaf pile to keep strong winds from scattering it. Ideally there would be a few slits for air and water to move in and out.

Those fortunate enough to own a shredder can run the leaves through it and use them as a mulch. Leaves can also be shredded with a lawn mower but it does take more effort. A 2 to 3-inch layer of shredded leaves will keep weeds down and moisture in. This mulch layer can be replenished each autumn as the next batch of leaves becomes available. While whole, unshredded leaves could also be used as a mulch they are more problematic as they tend to mat down limiting air and moisture movement, or blow around in the wind.

Leaves are a great source of carbon for the compost pile, either shredded or unshredded. Basic leaf compost can be made by adding either a cup or so of cottonseed, alfalfa or blood meal, or an inch of grass clippings or kitchen wastes, to about a 6 to 8-inch layer of leaves. After stacking up a 4 by 4 by 4-foot pile of these layers, it should be given a thorough mixing. If kept moderately moist and turned every few weeks, the leaf compost can be ready for use by the next growing season. Don't worry about turning the pile during the cold winter months. Left undisturbed, at least some decomposition may continue in the more insulated center of the pile even as temperatures drop.

Composts are finished when individual leaves are no longer readily distinguishable; they have an earthy smell, a crumbly texture and a dark brown color.

Recycling the leaves that cover our yards and gardens is a step towards a more sustainable life style. Whether used as compost, leaf mold or mulch, leaves are beneficial additions to our yards and gardens. It's no wonder many refer to them as 'gardeners' gold'.

If you have questions about leaf composting or on any home & garden questions, contact the UConn Home & Garden Education at (877) 486-6271 or www.ladybug.uconn.edu or your local Cooperative Extension Center.