

Leave The Leaves

Take a walk in a forest. You'll find that no one rakes up the leaves in the fall. There is a soft feel to each step as you walk on soil fed by decades of decayed leaves. Can you imagine what a walk in the woods would feel like if someone came in every fall and raked up the leaves? It would be an impoverished experience.

And yet, every fall homeowners and businesses spend a lot of time and effort to rake up or blow the leaves to the curb, after which we pay township employees to come around with a big truck and vacuum them up, using more tax dollars for gasoline to run the trucks and creating air pollution in the process. Then in spring we spend more money to buy mulch to put underneath our trees and shrubs and in our garden beds. Why is something that's good enough for the trees and shrubs in a forest not good enough for the trees and shrubs in our backyards?

Leave the leaves on site to nourish the soil, retain moisture and provide habitat for overwintering wildlife such as caterpillars, toads, and insects. You'll save time and money in the process.



What can I do?

1. Don't blow, mow! If there is lawn beneath the trees, mow the leaves with a mulching lawnmower and leave them where they are to fertilize the lawn.
2. Create a garden bed beneath the trees and just leave the leaves where they fall. If any drift outside of the area beneath the tree, just rake them back in. It would be a self-mulching, self-fertilizing garden bed. There are a number of drought tolerant, shade-loving native plants that would do well beneath a tree. And the other benefit is that you would not need to mow the lawn around protruding tree roots, saving time.
3. Overwinter the leaves in a corral and use them as mulch in the spring. You can easily build a corral out of a length of chicken wire. Form it into a circle or oval and connect the ends with zip ties or pieces of wire. Locate it away from the lawn, place 4



stakes through the wire into the ground to hold it up, and dump your leaves in it. You will be amazed at the reduction in volume when springtime comes. Remove the stakes, roll up the chicken wire, and store the corral for the next batch of fall leaves. Now you can spread the decomposing leaves in your garden beds instead of mulch.

4. Use the leaves as “brown” material in your compost bin. Spring and summer produce lots of “green” material that need “brown” material to balance it out but “browns” are typically in short supply during the growing months.

Further reading in the Green Guide

1. Composting
2. Grasscycling

Further reading online

1. Leave Leaves Alone. <http://www.leaveleavesalone.org>
2. National Wildlife Federation. Why You Should Leave the Leaves. <https://www.nwf.org/Magazines/National-Wildlife/2015/OctNov/Gardening/Leave-the-Leaves>