

Recycling Leaves: Trash to Treasure

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Leaves on Turf

The annual deluge of leaves is a sure sign that fall is falling and what we Texans call winter is just around the corner. A few species begin to drop leaves in late September and October, while the majority hold on until November when the first freeze usually brings an official end to the season. Before you head outside with rake in hand let me suggest a few time and money saving ideas I think you'll find very useful.

How about if we start with a Madison Avenue "infomercial" approach:

- Tired of long hours behind a rake cleaning up after messy trees when you'd rather be inside watching the latest game or checking out the holiday sales around town?
- Looking for a fast, easy way to remove fallen leaves without the fuss of raking and bagging?
- Want to save \$\$\$ on fertilizer, trash bags and "store bought" mulches?
- Interested in an organic, 100% natural plant fertilizer that's absolutely FREE? Yes, you heard it right... FREE!!!
- Want to get in on the ground floor (literally) of a national trend in lawn care that is sweeping the country?

Then look no further. The latest (and oldest) innovation in fall landscape cleanup is available now. Send no money... operators are not standing by... and you won't get a bamboo steamer or set of steak knives thrown in with the deal, because this is not an offer of a new product but of a "new" way to recycle your landscape wastes at home and turn trash to treasure while saving time and money!

First, a few facts about leaves. Approximately 75% of the nutrients a tree takes up during the season are stored in its leaves. When you fertilize your landscape, a portion of that fertilizer is used to make leaves, which are then shed in fall.

These fallen leaves represent a natural, organic source of nutrients for your landscape. If you bag them for curbside pickup and let your fees pay to have them picked up and hauled away, you're just "renting" fertilizer, not buying it!

In natural settings like forests and meadows, we see the leaf cycle operating as it was designed to do from the beginning. Leaves drop and collect as mulch, protecting soil from crusting, erosion, temperature extremes, drying out, and compaction. In time they decompose, slowly releasing nutrients to growing plants.

No one fertilizes and mulches the forest. No one bags it either! You can put this natural cycle to work for you.



Forest Floor—Composted Leaves

Mow Leaves

The simplest way to recycle leaves is to mow over them. It is amazing how fast and effectively a mower will make leaves disappear into the turf. Mulching leaves will not harm turf and in fact can benefit it by mulching thin spots, thereby discouraging weed seeds from sprouting. Try mulching and you'll never go back to raking!

A mulching mower works well, as will a standard type mower with the discharge chute closed. Set the front wheels a notch or two higher to allow leaf litter to enter the mower housing. Only mulch leaves (and grass for that matter) when the yard is dry because wet materials will quickly clog the mower.



Mulching Mower with Leaves and Clippings on Tarp

Mulching With Leaves

Another method of leaf recycling is to collect them and use them for mulch. The old fashioned method of raking the yard works fine of course but there are easier ways. Your standard type mower can be used to blow them into windrows for fast, easy collection. Or, a bagging mower can be used to gather leaves.

Mulch flower beds about two inches deep. Gardens should receive two or three inches and shrubs and trees three to four inches. If you have any extra leaves left over, which is very unlikely, save them to replenish mulched areas when the weather gets hot in June.

Composting

A third leaf recycling technique is composting. There are numerous approaches to composting including sheet composting, trench composting and composting in traditional heaps and bins.

Sheet composting means spreading a thin layer of leaves over the garden and rototilling it in. Then repeat with another layer. The leaves will decompose over a month or so making the garden soil richer. Trench composting is filling a trench with leaves and then covering it with a thin layer of soil to speed decomposition.



Tiller Mixing Leaves into Soil

You can also spread leaves between garden beds for a good pathway material that will decompose over time. Whatever method you choose, put your leaves and other garden debris to work for you. They are free, organic, slow-release fertilizers; the way nature was designed to work!



Leaves in Garden Walkway