

Leave the leaves?

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It's that time of year again. After being treated to spectacular fall colors of tree leaves turned bright yellows, oranges and reds, the inevitable happens—the leaves fall. Those trees in your yard means the leaves fall into your yard, and onto your grass. Then out come the rakes, and we automatically rake the leaves and find something to do with them.

But, maybe we should stop and think about why we're spending all that time investing in blisters by raking the lawns. With more and more questions about what to do with those leaves once they're raked up, it's time to take a closer look at this annual fall ritual.

First, should you rake? If there are a lot of leaves, they will mat down under the snow and smother the grass. So if you have large trees, especially maples, you may have no choice if you want your grass to look good next year.

However, if you have a relatively small amount of leaves falling on your grass, there may be no reason to rake them. If you run your lawn mower over the leaves, it will chop them up and disperse them. The smaller leaf pieces will fall in between the grass blades and decompose, releasing nutrients to feed your lawn. This is especially effective if you use a mulching mower to mulch the leaves.

If you decide you do need to rake the leaves, consider yourself lucky to have such a valuable commodity! There are many uses for leaves.

Gardeners will find an endless variety of ways to use the leaves. It's often best to chop them up first, because as whole leaves, they can mat together too much or blower around. A chipper/shredder is the most effective way to chop leaves, but if you don't have one, you can pile the raked leaves and run the lawnmower over them to chop them up.

Once chopped, use the leaves for mulch around shrubs, piling it 4-6 inches deep to help control grass and weeds. This will reduce maintenance next year as you won't have as much trimming around the base of shrubs. You can also use the chopped leaves to cover perennials and roses after the ground freezes. This will help keep the ground from thawing and re-freezing early in spring, which often damages perennials. Once the ground freezes, pull the leaves off the sprouting perennials and leave it for a weed-controlling mulch between the plants.

Chopped leaves are a perfect component of compost! Stack those chopped leaves in alternating layers with grass clippings, kitchen wastes, and a little bit of soil. While they won't do a lot of decomposing during the frozen winter, come spring, you will be well on your way to your own "black gold". Spread finished compost around perennials and shrubs, in your annual flower gardens and vegetable gardens, or use it in containers where you plant summer flowers.

Don't worry about your compost pile offending the neighbors! Proper compost piles do not stink. Never put meat scraps or fats on the pile—just fruit and vegetable scraps—and you won't get an offensive odor.

If you don't want a compost pile, you can till chopped leaves right into the soil of your vegetable and flower gardens now. It will start to break down and add valuable organic matter, improving your soil.

So, first evaluate if you even need to rake leaves, or if mowing them up is good enough. Never ever ever rake leaves or grass clippings into the street where they can get into the sewers and find their way to surface water bodies. They carry along phosphorus, which is what turns water green with algae in summer.

If you do need or want to rake, collect all those valuable leaves, chop them up, and put them to good use. Consider yourself lucky that you have such a wonderful resource available to you.