

## Leaf Litter

**By: Adam Downing, Virginia Cooperative Extension**

Leaves - they have cooled you during the hot summer months and are now going out in a flame of glory, exhibiting their hidden colors. But then what? Leaf litter, as we call it in the woods, for some is a dreaded chore. For others, it is desirable free organic resource. And, (since local is the buzz word of the day) it doesn't get any more local than leaves from a tree in your yard.

Fallen leaves are valuable. They have relatively large amounts of elements such as calcium and potassium, both essential to plant growth. Additionally, they are a form of organic matter. Decomposing leaves enhance soil structure, help it to retain moisture, and encourage good root development. People pay good money for this. When you buy a bag of compost, it may very well have come from leaves.



Homeowners deal with leaves in a myriad of ways. While burning is perhaps the most fun, it's the most wasteful and environmentally damaging. Let's consider some other options.

The simplest way deal with fallen leaves, if the layer is not too heavy, is to mow them (without a catcher attached) until they are in pieces small enough to fall between the blades of grass so as not to smother your lawn. Dry leaves chop more easily than wet and it's best to get out there and mow more often rather than wait till they all fall. Use of a mulching blade may enhance your mower's ability to shred leaves. This is a good way to increase the organic matter content of your lawn.

Other ways to capitalize on the free fertilizer and organic matter your trees have bestowed upon you is to use the fallen leaves to mulch around trees, shrubs and in planting beds or add them to a compost pile. Many individuals choose to shred their leaves before mulching with them or composting. Shredding is not necessary but does provide an advantage by accelerating the decomposition process and reducing space requirements.

If you choose to compost your leaves, a bit of incorporated nitrogen may help the decomposition process. Nitrogen can be added with commercial fertilizers or with nitrogen-rich plant material, such as grass clippings. For more information on

composting contact your local Extension Office or go on line at <http://www.ext.vt.edu/> and search “compost” for relevant publications.

I do a combination of the above. I like to allow a pile of leaves to sit on my garden through the winter and then till them in when spring comes. To do this, I rake the heaviest leaf fall areas and drag the leaves to the garden on a tarp. For most of the yard, I mow. Sometimes it takes a few passes but eventually the shredded leaves are small enough to fall between the blades of grass. Here they will decompose over winter while improving the soil.



Lastly, if you do not wish to deal with your leaves in any of the above ways, your municipality may have viable options. Check with your city or county for a leaf pick-up program or a drop-off site for leaves. Hopefully you’ll find an option that doesn’t waste this great resource.

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