

## What to Do With All These Leaves?

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While autumn is one of my favorite seasons of the year, it often brings a sight that bothers me: thousands of bags of fallen leaves left on the curb. It's such a waste for this free source of organic material to be dragged to the landfill, when it could be used right on our own properties.

The first thing homeowners should do is mow these leaves up. Mowing or using a leaf-shredder reduces the volume of leaves to 10 percent of the original pile. So, instead of creating 50 bags of leaves, you'd only create five.

Ambitious gardeners can take these shredded leaves and add them to a compost bin. Composting reduces the volume by another 50 percent. A simple compost bin can be made out of chicken wire; more elaborate bins can be made out of treated lumber, old pallets, leftover building materials, or whatever you have handy. A bin four feet high and four feet wide is ideal, and not too large for most gardeners to deal with.

Mowing up the leaves also adds some grass clippings, which supply the nitrogen that microbes need to break down the leaves. Spray some water on the leaves as you fill the bin: the shredded mass needs to have the moisture level of a wrung-out sponge. Turn the pile over 3 or 4 weeks, and by springtime, you should have some excellent organic material to add to your flower and vegetable gardens.

I sometimes find that composting is a bit too much work for my busy schedule. Instead, I take my shredded leaves and spread them directly over the garden. Once the last of the leaves have been dumped, I can rototill them directly into the garden. The earthworms and microbes can then decompose them directly into the soil over the winter.

Don't have a garden? Then use the shredded leaves as mulch. Spread them 4 to 6 inches deep over the root systems of trees and around shrubs, taking care not to pile the mulch onto the bark itself. After a few rains, the mulch will pack down to a depth of 3 or 4 inches, which is perfect for protecting tree roots and keeping grass and weeds from competing with your tree for water and nutrients. With a little bit of careful maneuvering, you can have your mower gather the shredded leaves under the tree for you, so you don't even need to rake!

Speaking of leaving leaves under trees... Some homeowners spend all weekend raking the needles out from under their pine trees, and then call me and ask what they can do with the needles. My advice: put them back under the pine trees! It's free mulch to prevent weeds and turfgrass from getting too close to the pines. Plus, the needles help keep the soil acidic, which pine trees need. Why work harder than you have to?

For more information on fall leaves, contact the Purdue Extension Service at (812) 435-5287.