

## To Rake or Not to Rake...That is the Question

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As I prepare my annual “clean up the yard and garden” fall articles, I’m kind of torn as to what to say. I’ve seen numerous articles this year on social media, imploring readers to not rake leaves. The articles talk about preserving habitat for small creatures, like turtles, frogs, and salamanders. I’ve seen claims about the pupae of various moths and butterflies hiding in or under the leaves. Or how leaving the leaves on the ground reduces pollution, returns nutrients to the soil, and feeds earthworms.

Please remember that we rake the leaves off the lawn because they will smother the grass. Now, if you want to have less grass, that’s fine, but you’ll need to do more than just allowing leaves to collect. You’ll need to plant flowers, shrubs, groundcovers, and other perennials to prevent the lawn from coming back.

It is true that various small creatures will overwinter in leaf debris. I’m not certain, though, how many salamanders, box turtles, or other vertebrates are found in the average city yard, especially if you are not near a pond or other suitable habitat for them during the summer. It’s more likely that mice and voles will hide under this leaf debris. These rodents can sometimes damage garden plants and ornamentals. When it gets really cold, they may even try to move inside our homes. Sanitation – removing a pest’s shelter – is usually the first and most beneficial step for pest control.

This concept of sanitation is also important if your landscape suffered from some insect or disease problem. If your crabapple suffered from apple scab or rust disease this past year, it is essential that those leaves be raked out and destroyed, to protect your ornamental tree and reduce the need to spray it next year.

To get the leaves off the lawn usually requires some machinery, some of which can contribute to air pollution. Leaf blowers and lawn mowers do contribute to air quality problems, especially when you consider how many millions of these devices are running during the fall. Burning leaves is illegal in many communities, and even if it isn’t, the smoke can cause breathing problems for neighbors with respiratory problems. Hand raking the leaves into a mulch layer under the trees is a much better alternative.

If the leaves can be left on the lawn, they do return nutrients to the soil. The organic matter (humus) that develops over time feeds earthworms and other soil organisms. A way to accomplish this, without smothering your lawn, is to run over the leaves with a lawnmower whose bag has been removed. The mower will shred the leaves, making them less likely to suffocate the lawn. The tiny leaf pieces will break down more quickly than whole leaves, which benefits the soil organisms, yet doesn’t reduce the visual quality of the lawn.

For more information on fall yard care, contact the Purdue Extension Service at 812-435-5287.