

When Autumn Leaves Are Falling.....

“Leave” Them on Your Lawn for a Healthy Yard & Clean Water

Autumn leaves are starting to fall and now is a good time to consider alternatives to dumping them in the street for pick-up. Even though your community may offer this service, you might want to consider the option of recycling those leaves on your property, where your own landscape can benefit from this annual ‘fall’ of rich, organic matter. Recycling leaves on your lawn also keeps them out of storm drains and away from our surface waters where they would only add nutrients that encourage algae blooms. Homeowners should also avoid blowing or dumping leaves and grass clippings into lakes, ponds, ditches, or storm water retention basins. If we want clean water, we need to avoid any unnecessary addition of nutrients to our waterways.

Leaves are a valuable natural resource that you do not have to purchase! The trees on your property draw nutrients and minerals from the soil, converting them into new leaves and branches. When you rake and remove those leaves in the fall, you interfere with the natural cycle by which nutrients are returned to the soil. By annually removing the leaf ‘litter’ the soil will gradually lose its fertility and that will ultimately affect the health of all the plants that you are trying to grow. Additionally, many insects need the loose substrate that is created when leaves are left on the ground beneath trees. Many moth and butterfly caterpillars that feed on the leaves of trees and shrubs drop to the ground beneath their host plants to complete their life cycle by over-wintering in the leaf litter. When we get out our rakes and leaf blowers and remove this critical habitat we reduce the number of spring emerging moths and butterflies. Any disruption to the life cycle of these species will ultimately reduce the number of caterpillars that will be available for birds to rear their young the following spring and summer. Caterpillars are the most efficient and nutritious food choice for nearly all Ohio birds while feeding nestlings. Other beneficial insects also depend on the soil conditions that are created by undisturbed leaf litter beneath trees and shrubs to complete their life cycle.

So, how do you help maximize the benefit of keeping leaves on your property while also minimizing your efforts to manage them? The best way is to mow the leaves that blow into your lawn – especially if you have mulching blades on your mower. It may take several passes to chop the leaves up fine enough – pieces that are less than 1” rough diameter is the goal. Even if your lawn has some brown patches for a few days, the chopped leaves will quickly settle to the soil and you should see some grass leaves poking through. If you don’t see grass above the chopped leaves after a few days, then run the mower over them again. When the chopped leaves settle around the grass blades, they also help block the sunlight that many weed seeds require to germinate. So, by mulching leaves into your grass you can also reduce weed germination in your lawn! And don’t forget that next spring your grass will also reap the benefit of those

recycled nutrients as the mulched leaves decompose. Spreading costly fertilizers on your lawn may restore some nutrients, but it will not replace all of the vital minerals and organic matter needed for healthy, vigorous plants. On the other hand, leaves contain both the macro and micro-nutrients that your lawn and landscape needs.

However, your landscape may host many trees that might produce more leaves than what you can reasonably mulch into your turfgrass. In this situation, consider composting those extra leaves. Leaf compost can be used to amend soil in flower and vegetable gardens or can be used in the same way you might use hardwood mulch around existing plants in landscape beds.

By choosing to recycle your leaves you can:

- reduce the cost of purchased landscape products
- increase the fertility of the soil on your property
- reduce weed germination in your turfgrass
- improve wildlife habitat for birds, moths, butterflies and other creatures
- have a positive impact on the water quality in your watershed

Remember, we all live in a watershed and therefore we should all do our part to keep the water clean in our streams and lakes in Northeast Ohio, especially Lake Erie which provides drinking water for millions of people. The Great Lakes system also supports our economic vitality and we need to keep them swimmable, fishable and drinkable!

References:

Montgomery County, Maryland, Department of Environmental Protection

Summit Soil & Water Conservation District

'Nature's Best Hope' by Douglas Tallamy