

Top 10 Reasons Why Gardeners Treasure Their Leaves

Kevin Schoessow, UW-Extension Agriculture Development Educator

Leaves are perhaps one of the most readily available and abundant sources of organic materials that home gardeners have at their disposal. Every fall mother nature blankets the ground with this weed-free gift. All we have to do is go out and collect them and recycle them, as nature does, back into our landscapes.

Raking and removing tree leaves, including pine needles, is an annual ritual for homeowners. There are plenty of good reasons to remove leaves from lawns, from rain gutters, driveways, flower beds and around buildings. In these places, leaves are considered undesirable because they smother and shade plants, become a safety concern or they are viewed as unaesthetic.

A common practice is to rake them up into piles and haul them away or rake them into the edge of a wooded or non-landscaped area. In some cases, leaf collector mowers with baggers are used or perhaps the leaves are just mulch mowed and left on the ground.

While not always practical, perhaps a slight change in how we think about fallen leaves can turn what might be perceived as a chore into a valued and rewarding experience. Where possible, look for ways leaves can stay on your property and be recycled and re-used. While a thick layer of leaves on your front step or on the lawn may not be helpful, they do have plenty of benefits to gardens and landscapes.

Here are ten reasons why gardeners should treasure leaves and look at them as something of value rather than something to dispose of.

- Leaves are a free source of organic matter and minerals like calcium, magnesium, nitrogen, phosphorus and potassium.
- Leaves can be used just as they are or shredded to make mulch.
- Leaves decay quickly to provide nutrients faster than other slow-decaying mulches.
- They can be dug into the vegetable garden to improve soil structure for both clay and sandy soils.
- Leaves can be used as plant protection during winter and then turned into the soil in spring.
- Shredded leaves used as mulch in the vegetable garden moderate soil temperatures and hold in moisture during the summer.
- Leaves can be stored in bags over the winter and then used to prepare vegetable beds in spring.
- Leaves are a useful addition to the compost pile.
- Shredded leaves stacked in a pile will turn into leaf mold (a valuable soil amendment) on their own.
- Leaves recycle nutrients to the lawn when shredded and left in place.



Kevin Schoessow, Agriculture Development Educator serving Burnett, Sawyer and Washburn Counties. Office located at the Spooner Agriculture Research Station. 715-635-3506, kevin.schoessow@wisc.edu.