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Mark Keaton's Extension News: Don't bag your leaves

Bagging leaves and not composting will deprive landscapes and gardens of useful fertilizer nutrients.

Leaves contain 50-80 percent of the nutrients extracted by trees from the soil and air during the growing season. Landscapes will benefit if leaves are used instead of bagged.



How can you use all those leaves? One alternative is to mow them, preferably with a mulching mower. A light cover of leaves can be chopped up and left on the lawn. They'll decompose before spring.

If there are too many leaves to leave on the ground, chop them up and put a 2-3 inch layer of the mulch in flower beds, around shrubs or trees and between the rows in gardens.

Mulching has several benefits. It reduces moisture evaporation from the soil surface and inhibits weed growth. Mulching also moderates the soil temperature, keeps soil from eroding and prevents soil compaction.

A lawn mower with a bag attachment provides an easy way to collect shredded leaves and carry them to the mulching site. If you don't have a bag attachment, mow in a circle and then rake or blow the leaves where you want them.

Leaves can be worked directly into the soil of gardens or flower beds with a tiller. Tilling-in the leaves will improve aeration and drainage in heavy clay soils and increase the water and nutrient-holding capacity of light sandy soils. Adding a little nitrogen fertilizer when you're working the leaves into the soil will speed up decomposition.

One of the best ways to use fall leaves is to compost them in a bin. Whole, dry leaves don't decompose very quickly on their own, so chop them or shred them and wet the leaves with water. Then, add a nitrogen source (manure or a high nitrogen fertilizer) and some soil. The soil adds microorganisms that speed up decomposition.

Exact details on building composting bins and creating nutrient-rich compost piles from leaves are presented in publications available at University of Arkansas Division of Agriculture Cooperative Extension office, 213 E. Sixth St.; call 425-2335; or visit www.uaex.edu and search publications for composting.

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