

What to do with all these leaves?



Use a mulching type lawnmower — with or without your grass-catcher — as an alternative to raking fall leaves.

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One alternative to raking leaves is to Shred them using your lawn mower and then use this nutritious mulch around your flower beds and vegetable gardens.

Question: I am so tired of raking all these leaves every fall. Is there anything else I can do with them?

AnsWER: The short answer is a resounding yes!

It has often bothered me to see people raking all these leaves and putting them in large plastic garbage bags to go to the landfill. Those leaves are nature's free fertilizer! Why pack them up and send them away?

Let's talk about ways you can use leaves and save yourself from some of that raking and bagging.

■ Option 1 – Don't rake. Just leave them on your lawn. There is one caveat: you must get your lawnmower out (mulching type preferred, but any rotary type will work). Set the mower height to about 3 inches and go over your leaves



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until they are chopped finely — about the size of a dime. Ideally you would do this weekly — don't wait until you have piles so high your kids want to jump into them. Take your grass-catcher off your mower and just let the shredded pieces fall back into your grass. When you are done, you should be able to see grass blades. You do not want a thick mat of leaves that will suffocate your lawn by blocking sunlight and holding in moisture.

■ Option 2 – Mow your lawn and leaves and catch the clippings in your mower's

grass-catcher. This is great to add to your compost pile as it is a mix of dry and green material. No raking! (Composting is another whole topic, but you can get started by looking at OSU Extension's publications. A simple explanation can be found at bit.ly/3nuARye).

■ Option 3 – Make Leaf Mold. Leaf mold is what happens naturally in the forest with all those leaves. Pile your damp leaves in a wood or wire bin or in a trash bag with holes punched in it. Check it periodically to make sure it has enough moisture and add water as necessary. It will take about a year to finish. Leaf mold is useful for helping soil to hold moisture, as well as attracting beneficial soil organisms. Add it to your containers or garden beds.

■ Option 4 – Shred the leaves using your lawn mower

and then use this nutritious mulch around your flower beds and vegetable gardens. Apply a 2-3 inch layer around trees and shrubs. Be sure you keep mulch from directly touching stems and leaves. Using mulch will reduce winter soil compaction, maintain a more consistent soil temperature, and break down in the soil to release nutrients.

Most of the common deciduous trees we have in Douglas County are useful in the options I've listed above. Some plants have allelopathic properties, meaning something in that plant inhibits growth in others. If you have walnut trees, especially black walnuts, those leaves would best be raked and not used as compost or mulch.

If you live within the Roseburg city limits and still want to dispose of your leaves, the

Department of Public Works runs the leaf collection program for about two months starting about now. Those leaves are either composted or given to other homeowners who request them for using as above. Of course, you will be raking!

Whatever you decide to do, enjoy the crisp autumn air and the beautiful fall colors around the Umpqua Valley. Just remember, all those fallen leaves are packed full of free mulch and fertilizer!

Do you have a gardening or insect question? Contact the Douglas County Master Gardeners at douglasmg@oregonstate.edu or 541-672-4461 or visit 1134 SE Douglas Ave., Roseburg. Douglas County Master Gardeners are trained volunteers who help the OSU Extension Service serve the people of Douglas County.