

To rake the leaves, or leave the leaves?

Douglas County Master Gardeners answer questions on what to do with those piles of fallen leaves

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Q: I read somewhere that you shouldn't rake leaves from your lawn, but "leave the leaves" to benefit wildlife like salamanders, chipmunks, toads, shrews, etc. Is that true?

A: Answer: Well, yes, but not as it pertains to your lawn. Fallen leaves act as a natural mulch, and layers of them create their own mini eco-systems which small vertebrates and insect species make use of. However, leaving them whole on your lawn, especially in thick layers, suffocates your turf, creating bare patches in your lawn. Heavy rains on these layers also attract fungi. Best to leave fallen leaves in woodlands or in landscape borders and planting beds free of turf. Leaves protect the soil around your trees and shrubs, protect their roots from drought, heat and cold, as well as inhibit weed growth.

An alternative to raking leaves is running over dry to moist leaves with a lawnmower a number of times til they are shredded into dime-size pieces. These small pieces will work their

way into the soil and act as an excellent mulch for your lawn, invigorating it. Simply raise your mower height to about 3-4" before running it over your leaves.

Here's two other ways to make good use of this rich source of organic nutrients instead of raking and disposing:

■ Pile-composting for mixed borders

■ Rake the leaves into loose piles or in wire bins about 4 feet square within your borders.

■ Mix in a few shovelfuls of soil, and add 20 to 30 gallons of water to aid in decomposition.

■ Pull the piles or bins apart in the spring, and spread the decayed leaves throughout the border.

■ Cover the decayed leaves with a 1-inch-deep layer of fresh mulch.

■ Sheet-composting for annual beds

■ Rake your leaves into the empty beds, and shred them with a lawn mower.

■ Sprinkle the leaves with a 1-pound coffee can's worth of 5-10-5 fertilizer per 100 square feet of garden.

■ Turn the leaves, and water thoroughly to disperse the fertilizer, which speeds decay.

■ Turn the leaves again in spring, and plant right

through the remaining clumps, which will provide nutrients as they decompose.

It doesn't make much sense to treat leaves as trash when they offer such a rich source of mulch and nutrients. Raking leaves to the curb for collection often leads to the leaves being washed by heavy rains into catch basins where they decompose, releasing phosphorus and nitrogen eventually into our streams and rivers. This leads to algae blooms in the summer which lower oxygen levels necessary for the survival of fish and other aquatic species.

Instead of spending millions of dollars each year in the collection, transport, and processing of autumn leaves, municipalities could use those dollars elsewhere for needed resources in our communities. Using our own leaves for the benefit of our property and gardens makes good sense, saves money and enhances the environment we share.

Q: I would like to prune my fruit trees, and shrubs in the late fall. Is there any reason that I should wait until later in the winter?

A: There are several reasons to wait a little longer into the late part of winter before pruning fruit trees and shrubs. By waiting until February you will have allowed most of the severe weather period to

pass. This helps plants in a number of ways. Unpruned plants store more carbohydrate in the stems and branches than pruned plants. This is important during cold winters to have adequate food supply for a strong start come next spring.

Another reason to be patient and not prune too early is that pruning stimulates plants to come out of dormancy earlier than unpruned plants. Pushing a plant to bud out a week or so earlier may cause your plants to be more vulnerable to a frost or freeze come spring. If you have dozens of fruit trees and won't have time to prune them all in February, I would suggest starting with some trees in the last half of January. Try to stay away from pruning in November and December when your fruit tree wood has still not hardened off.

Do you have a gardening question? Please e-mail, call, or visit the Douglas County Master Gardeners Plant Clinic at douglasmg@oregonstate.edu, 541-672-4461, or 1134 S.E. Douglas Ave., Roseburg.

Douglas County Master Gardeners are trained volunteers who help the OSU Extension Service serve the people of Douglas County.



PHOTOS COURTESY OF DOUGLAS COUNTY MASTER GARDENERS
Mowing leaves is a good way to create mulch.



Pile the leaves into bins to speed up the mulching process.