

What to Do with Fall Leaves

Cleaning up gardens in the fall can be a laborious, but necessary task. One of the most tedious tasks for many is what to do with all the leaves in your yard. You rake. And rake. And rake, to no avail. Is there something more productive you could be doing with fall leaves than simply throwing them away?

- **Compost:** Dry leaves are considered the “browns” in the composting process. These browns are essential in composting as they provide the carbon source that the microorganisms in your pile need to feed on. Leaves will break down quickly in your compost pile if they’re shredded before layering in. Other browns to add to your pile include; twigs, newspaper, pine needles and straw. The “greens” of your pile can include; grass clippings, coffee grounds, fruit and vegetable scraps and eggshells. Those browns should be applied in a 3:1 ratio to the green materials. Water should also be applied but only to the point of making your compost pile feel like a wet sponge. Garden fertilizer can help to feed the microorganisms in your pile, especially if you have significantly more brown than green materials. Materials to avoid adding to your compost pile include; meat, large sticks or branches, oils and dog or cat waste. For more information on composting, including how to select a compost bin and a troubleshooting guide visit our website: <http://www.shawnee.k-state.edu/lawn-garden/compost.html>. Composting your leaves takes a waste product and makes it into a valuable garden additive. Another advantage to this method is that as more leaves fall you can layer them into your compost pile with minimal effort. If you’re a Shawnee County resident, you can also pick up a voucher for a free compost bin at the Shawnee County Extension Office. These vouchers are redeemable at Skinner’s Garden Store or Jackson’s Greenhouse and Garden Center. Vouchers are limited to one per household.
- **Lawn Fertilizer:** Fallen leaves in your lawn can act as a fertilizer if they’re left to decompose. Thanks to our Kansas wind, if left as they fell, most leaves would blow into our shrubs and fence lines. To keep them where they’re needed, rake the leaves evenly across your lawn and mow them into the grass. Sometimes repeated passes may be needed to get the pieces small enough to stay put. Letting these leaves decompose on your grass works in the same way as leaving on lawn clippings—putting the nutrients from those waste products back into the soil for the plants to use. As with grass clippings, make sure to avoid leaving large clumps of leaves that may block sunlight and moisture from reaching the plants. Over time, working the leaves back into the soil may reduce your need for fertilizers.
- **Habitat:** Often times our garden practices are harmful to the environment in ways we can easily overlook. In nature, no one rakes up leaves. They lay on forest floors and decompose. As they lay, they provide habitat and food for many insects. When we think of insect habitat your mind may take you to ants and termites but in fact, most insects are neutral (having little to no impact on humans) or beneficial like butterflies and bees. Removing all the leaves from your yard may make the space uninhabitable for small organisms looking for a winter home. Although leaving your entire yard full of debris may not be desirable, a compromise is possible. Look for a space that is less visible around your home. Leaving small spaces for insects to overwinter can help provide habitat in an otherwise unfriendly space.

- **Mulch:** Leaves can make a wonderful mulch for overwintering plants. As with mulching lawns, running over leaves a few times with your lawn mower will help the pieces to stay where you place them. Do this on your lawn and move the leaves onto the plants. Most perennials won't tolerate being mowed over! Many tender perennials benefit from a fall mulch to help protect against hard frosts. Insulating the soil with mulch can also help to extend the season for soil microbe activity. Fall mulch should be removed in March or when plants begin to emerge, whichever is first. Avoid mulching directing against your siding or the foundation of your house. When mulching trees, make a donut of mulch around the tree—not a volcano. Mounding mulch up against tree bark can increase rodent chewing on the bark and suffocate the tree root flare (the roots fanning out at the base of your tree).
- **Crafts:** So often you hear people say *"Kids don't get outside enough anymore! When I was a kid I stayed outside until the street lights come on!"* Fall is a great time to get kids outside and to get them interested in the natural world! Leaves can be collected for scavenger hunts, pressed for framing or for decoupage. Encourage the children in your life to try to identify the trees in their yard or neighborhood park. The Arbor Day Foundation sells *"What Tree is That?"* dichotomous tree guides to help even the inexperienced identify trees. You can find the guide free online (<https://www.arborday.org/TREES/whattree/whatTree.cfm?ItemID=E6A>) or order a guide for \$5.

There are so many ways to utilize fallen leaves around your home and yard! Although sending them to the landfill may seem harmless, if they are bagged in plastic, they can have negative impact on our environment. According to the U.S. National Park Service, plastic bags take 10-20 years to biodegrade. Take a small step this fall to keep valuable nutrients in your yard and reduce your environmental impact at the same time.