

It is almost time for nature's most abundant crop - tree leaves



Don't miss the opportunity to harvest this crop. Fall leaves are packed with organic matter. They contain trace minerals that trees draw up from deep in the soil. They are the main ingredient in the dark rich humus that covers the forest floor and they contain about 50-80% of the nutrients that trees extract from the soil and air during the season. Amending soil with leaves alone won't boost yields the way adding finished compost does, but using leaves in the garden adds organic matter to the soil. Organic matter improves soil structure, holds nutrients and moisture that are released slowly to plants, and provides food for beneficial soil organisms.

You can replicate forest humus by mixing carbon-rich leaves with nitrogen-rich manure or grass clippings. Leaving this mixture to sit in a pile over a winter or two will result in beautiful compost for your garden. Add thick layers of leaves to your compost pile to balance the high-nitrogen grass clippings and weeds that you have been adding over the summer.

You can also make leaf mold, a great soil amendment. Simply rake your leaves into a pile and allow it to sit for one to three years. Fungus will break down the leaves and when it is finished, it looks and smells like the humus from the forest and is the perfect amendment for vegetable and flower gardens and potting soils. It is high in calcium and magnesium and retains 3-5 times its weight in water.

If possible, shred your leaves. Shredding leaves into smaller pieces allows the leaves to break down more quickly and prevents the leaves from packing into layers that won't let the water or air penetrate. Another benefit: it reduces the volume tremendously.

If you don't have a leaf shredder, you can use your lawnmower. Set the mower deck to its highest setting and simply drive over your pile of leaves one or more times. Another idea for shredding your leaves uses a 55-gallon garbage can and a string trimmer. Fill the can three-quarters of the way with leaves. Put the string trimmer in, turn it on and move through the layers of leaves. Be sure to wear eye and ear protection when using this method. Most of the deciduous leaves that grow in our area can be composted. Maple and oak are some of the best. Avoid black walnut leaves, as they contain juglone, which inhibits plant growth.

Improve your garden soil this fall by mixing in shredded leaves. If you add shredded leaves directly into the soil, you can add some slow-release nitrogen fertilizers to help the leaves decompose and to ensure that soil microbes don't use all of the available nitrogen. By spring, almost all of the chopped leaves will be completely decomposed.

Insulate tender plants from winter cold with a 6-inch blanket of shredded leaves. Cover cold-hardy vegetables such as carrots, kale, leeks and beets. As the gardening season winds down, use leaves to help focus on soil-building. As beds are cleaned out, cover the soil with a layer of shredded leaves and roughly work it in with a garden fork. Add some granular organic fertilizer and compost. For your asparagus bed, first cut the fronds down to about 12 inches, add granular fertilizer and then cover it with 3" layer of shredded leaves. Cover your newly planted garlic bed with a 4" layer of shredded leaves to give it winter protection.

Your flower beds can also benefit from shredded leaves. Simply apply a 2-3 inch layer in your beds and 6 inches around trees and shrubs, keeping the mulch from direct contact with the stems and trunks of your plants. The mulch will help the soil retain moisture, stay cool and limit the weed seed germination as well as add nutrients to the soil as they break down. Over time, you will have lighter, fluffier soil. Have an over-abundance of leaves? Rake them up and store them in plastic trash bags. Punch some holes in the bags and forget about them for the next year or so. These will make leaf mold this is wonderful for mulching perennial beds or when added to the compost pile or vegetable garden in the spring.

Don't have a vegetable or flower garden? There is still a use for your leaves. Shred them with you mower set to the highest setting and they will break down over the winter, providing the soil with nutrients and shade that will result in better grass. Do this each week as the leaves are falling and you won't have to rake leaves.

Stop the autumn tradition of raking fallen leaves into big piles onto the street only to end up in the landfill or incinerator. Treat your leaves like the valuable natural resource that they are.

Linda Hanson is a Master Gardener in York County. Penn State Master Gardeners are volunteers for Penn State Cooperative Extension. If you have a question, you can stop by to see us weekday mornings, call us at 717-840-7408, or email us at YorkMG@psu.edu. Call before you stop in to ensure there will be a Master Gardener available.