



CMG GardenNotes #655

Dealing with Leaves in the Landscape

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Many gardeners find that raking and clearing leaves from their landscapes in the fall is tedious and never-ending task. Depending on the age of the neighborhood, the size of trees and the number planted in or near the property, it can take a fair amount of time and energy to manage them.

Uses For Leaves

Leaves are a valuable resource in the landscape. While they are not considered a fertilizer replacement, (it would take 100 pounds of leaves per 1000 square feet of turfgrass to apply one pound of nitrogen if the leaf nitrogen value was 1%), they do have other benefits. Try to avoid sending the leaves to a landfill and use them in the landscape.

1. ***Mow the leaves into the lawn.*** Set the lawnmower deck to the highest setting. Remove the bagging attachment and make at least two passes over the lawn, chopping the leaves into small pieces. As long as you can see some grass through the leaves, the layer is not too thick. Research has found that mowing leaves into the lawn will return nutrients to the soil, provide food for earthworms, increase moisture for the turf roots and reduce weeds. ***Leaves do not lead to thatch accumulation.***



Research at Purdue University found that mulching leaves into the lawn at high rates did not affect turf quality, color or soil pH. A study at Michigan State University found that mulching leaves into the lawn reduced perennial weed populations like dandelions and annual weeds like crabgrass after three years. The small leaf pieces sift down onto the turf surface and prevent weed germination from bare soil. It is important that the leaves are shredded or mulched and not left whole on the lawn.

2. **Add leaves to compost bins.** Tree leaves are “brown” material and can be added to compost bins in combination with “green” materials. For more information on composting, refer to the Colorado Master Gardener Garden Notes #246 at www.cmg.colostate.edu.



3. **Add leaves to garden beds or raised beds.** Consider leaves a free source of organic matter. You can add up to six to eight inches of leaves (best if chopped by the lawnmower) into the vegetable garden. Water the surface, add some fertilizer to kick-start decomposition and let microbes break down the leaves through the winter. In the spring, till them into the soil or directly plant into the area. Be cautious about over-amending garden soils and consider having your soil tested first.

4. **Use as mulch in the landscape.** Leaves can be used as mulch around tender plants or those that are newly planted. Place a wire cage around the plant and pile three to six inches of shredded leaves inside the cage, next to the plant. As growth begins in the spring, remove the cage and leaves.

Author: Dr. Alison O'Connor, Colorado State University Extension. Photos from csu.cohorts.blogspot.com (Dr. Tony Koski) and (compost) farm3.staticflickr.com/2435/4022031843_65a2086098_z.jpg

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