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Autumn leaves are a windfall for your garden

By Tom Watson

Special to The Seattle Times

"Leaves are falling, down, down, down. Red and yellow, gold and brown." I learned that poem in kindergarten and said it over and over, driving my parents crazy. I still love leaves, even when a zillion of them cover the lawn in the fall. But more importantly, my garden loves leaves.

You probably already know you can use leaves to enhance your garden. But you may be surprised by all the eco-friendly methods and resources now available for gathering those fallen leaves and putting them to work for you.

Money does grow on trees. You need to get those leaves off the lawn, so why not save money in the process? The leaves from one large shade tree can easily be made into compost or mulch equal to \$50 worth of plant food and humus, according to Clean Air Gardening's Compost Guide.

Composting makes the best use of your leaves. Since leaves mostly contain carbon, you should mix or layer them with a high-nitrogen material such as grass clippings. To get the most efficient carbon-to-nitrogen ratio for your compost, use Klickitat County Solid Waste Department's handy online calculator (see "Leafy resources," right) to help you mix leaves and other materials.

To speed up the composting process, grind or shred your leaves. You could buy an electric leaf shredder for under \$150, but you can also just run over them with the lawn mower. Mulching mowers work well for this (the Northwest Natural Yard Days program offers discounts on mulching mowers every spring). To conserve resources, try to mow the lawn and shred your leaves at the same time,



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before the leaves get too thick.

Mulch ado about leaves

If you have too many leaves, or can't find the time to mix them with other materials for composting, you can still put them to good use. Simply set up a large enclosure with chicken wire in an out-of-the-way spot and pile in the leaves. It may take six months to two years, but they will eventually turn into dark and crumbly "leaf mold," the result of leaves rotting and breaking down, just like in the forest.

Leafy resources

Compost your leaves: www.compostguide.com.

Calculate your mix: www.klickitatcounty.org/solidwaste. Click on "Compost Mix Calculator."

Make leaf mold: gardening.wsu.edu/column/10-29-00.htm.

Northwest Natural Yard Days: www.yarddays.com. The fall sale (which ends Sept. 30) includes compost and related products; spring sale will include mulching mowers.

A number of trees common in the Seattle area — including Japanese maple, beech, alder and birch — have small or delicate leaves that break down quickly. Tougher leaves such as oak, London plane and horse chestnut take longer to decompose.

Leaf mold retains 300 to 500 percent of its weight in water, says the Compost Guide, so it makes terrific mulch for your garden.

A clean (and quiet) sweep

Before you turn those leaves into "black gold" for your garden, you need to pick them all up. You can always rake them, with an added benefit: Research by the Virginia Cooperative Extension found that raking and bagging leaves provides as much exercise as water aerobics or moderate bicycling.

Do your neighbors and the environment a favor and resist the urge to buy a leaf blower. Noisy enough to damage hearing, they have an even worse effect on the air. According to a California Air Resources Board report, leaf blowers (1999 models) produced 26 times more carbon monoxide per hour than a new car, and 49 times more particulate matter.

Recently an attractive alternative has emerged to the rake and blower: The push lawn sweeper. A little over 2 feet wide, it looks like the old push reel mowers, with a hamper in back. But instead of blades, it has brushes that sweep leaves into the hamper. These nonmotorized sweepers can be found online and at hardware and lawn equipment stores for under \$200. The lowest price I saw for a lawn sweeper was \$99.99 for a Sears Craftsman model.

Leave no leaf ungathered

Most residents of the Puget Sound area can set out their yard waste separately at the curb, and it ends up at a large compost facility. But it's more resource-efficient to deal with your yard waste in your own yard. Plus, you gain the satisfaction and savings from making your own natural soil enhancer.

You may not even have enough leaves in your yard to meet your compost and mulching needs. But you can likely find friends or family members who will gladly share their leaves, especially if you offer to rake them (it works with my father-in-law).

If you're really desperate for leaves, put out a "wanted" request on one of the online exchanges, such as Craigslist or Freecycle. Soon you'll be swimming in leaves — and your garden will thank you for it.

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