

Columnists

Originally published October 5, 2012 at 5:34 PM | Page modified October 13, 2012 at 1:17 PM

Leaf advice: from trees to composting

If leaves are piling up in your yard this fall, you really should take advantage of their natural power. Leaves are the ultimate in green, even when they're brown.

By Tom Watson

Special to The Seattle Times

If you walk much in the Seattle area, you may notice an occasional sweet smell this time of year. Some say it's like cotton candy or caramel. This fragrant aroma comes from the fallen leaves of katsura trees, which are common here.

As we enjoy their smells and colors, falling leaves become a natural playground. Many of us have fond memories of playing in huge piles, burying each other and laughing hysterically.

When you have leaf-dropping trees in your yard, however, the fun and games eventually end and those leaves need to go somewhere. Sure, you can put them in your yard-waste collection cart and they'll get composted. But without much additional work, you can do your own autumn alchemy and transform those leaves into rich compost or mulch for your garden.

Q: Creating my own compost from leaves may not be that hard, but picking up all the leaves wears me out. How do I make that easier?

A: Choose from the many practical leaf-collecting tools now available. These include handheld leaf scoops, carts designed for leaf collection, bag holders, push lawn sweepers and long-handled tools to scoop leaves out of gutters. Check out examples at seati.ms/PZLDX1 or seati.ms/O8AxAI.

Q: I have a gas-powered leaf blower. Am I evil?

A: No, but gas-powered leaf blowers can pollute the air and annoy neighbors. If you must use a leaf blower, consider switching to a cleaner, quieter electric model.

Most electric-leaf blowers use extension cords, but a few are cordless and rechargeable. For a yard with lots of trees, an electric-leaf blower that also vacuums and shreds leaves may prove extremely useful, especially if you share it with neighbors. These sell for \$60 and up at hardware and home-improvement stores or online.

Q: How about a few leaf-raking tips?

A: Although it provides wonderful exercise, raking leaves results in more injuries than you might think. Rake when it's dry, to lessen the chance of slipping on wet leaves. Be careful not to strain your back. Don't bend your back when you rake, but do bend your knees slightly.

Plastic rakes tend to break easily, so look for a steel rake with slightly flexible tines. Old-school bamboo rakes also work well, but may be hard to find.

Q: What are the best ways to compost leaves at home?

A: Shredding leaves greatly speeds along the composting process. If you don't have a shredder, run over the leaves with a lawn mower.

Leaves consist mostly of carbon. To achieve the desired balance of carbon and nitrogen, layer the leaves in your compost bin with a nitrogen-rich material such as grass clippings.

You can even compost leaves in a plastic garbage bag. Throw in small or ground-up wet leaves mixed with grass clippings. Tie the bag at the top and make a few slits in the sides for air circulation. Set it in your backyard out of sight and shake it every few weeks, and the finished compost will be ready for your garden in about six months.

If you have so many leaves you can't easily compost them, pile up the rest and let them slowly turn into "leaf mold," which is what you get when leaves break down into little pieces without the addition of other ingredients. Leaf mold is similar to what is found on the forest floor.

Learn more about composting at seati.ms/RgtjIA.

Q: How do I use leaf compost and leaf mold?

A: In the spring or fall, add compost made from leaves and other materials to vegetable and flower beds, dumping in about a wheelbarrow full for every 100 square feet. Use leaf mold year-round as a surface mulch under trees and shrubs.

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