

Mulch Leaves For Your Lawn and Garden

by Carol Barany

Last year at this time, remember how concerned we were that deciduous trees were simply not letting go of their leaves?

Normally, in response to autumn's shorter and colder days, plant hormones send messages to each leaf, saying it's time to drop. The tree responds by growing specialized cells at the place where the leaf stem attaches to the branch. These are called "abscission" cells, and they act just like scissors. Over a period of days or weeks, every leaf on the tree develops a line of cells designed to push it away from the branch.

Last year, September and October were far warmer months than normal. Trees assumed it was still growing season, and the process to shut down and prepare for winter was delayed. The sudden drop to freezing temperatures in mid-November killed the leaves instantly, but lack of fully formed abscission cells kept them on many Yakima trees well into this spring.

On some trees, leaf color went directly from green to brown, with no typical bright autumn hues in between.

Last week, brilliantly colored leaves began falling from my trees like pennies from heaven. It looks like leaf-fall this year will be what we normally expect.

Leaf cleanup can be a daunting task. Does it help that the National Wildlife Federation has proclaimed October 'National Leave the Leaves Month?'

This is not about leaving leaves and debris all over your lawn, driveway, and sidewalks. Excessive leaf matter on your lawn going into winter may smother the turf, and if not removed early in the spring, will inhibit growth. Also, the practice may promote snow mold diseases.

At the same time, raking and bagging leaves for disposal as garbage in landfills is no longer an environmentally acceptable option, plus it's expensive.

It's time to look at leaves as a valuable, useful, and free resource used in ways that support the ecosystem. Leaf litter on a garden bed creates habitat for wildlife, from small mammals and reptiles and amphibians to overwintering bees and moth and butterfly larvae.

If you're particularly tidy and pride yourself on a well-manicured lawn, it may be hard to walk away from that rake. However, research at Purdue University found that mulching leaves into the lawn, even at high rates, did not affect turf quality, color or soil pH.

Even the folks at the Scotts Corporation, a global leader in the lawn care products industry, agree. They point to a Michigan State University study that found mulching leaves into the lawn with a mower reduced weeds like dandelions and crabgrass after three years. The small leaf pieces sift down onto the turf surface and prevent weed germination from bare soil. What's not to like about that?

Research also found that mowing leaves into the lawn returns nutrients to the soil, provides food for earthworms, and increases moisture for the turf roots. This practice does not lead to thatch accumulation.

Last week, I changed the oil on my mulching mower. I'm ready.

I mulch most leaves right into the lawn where they fall.

On some days, I'll add the bagging attachment and collect some of the shreds. I pile these on my dahlia and annual cut flower beds to protect the soil over winter and to provide a weed barrier that will last long into next year's growing season.

When mulching leaves, keep the mower (a mulching mower works best) set at the same height you mow the turf, or no less than 3". Leaves should be dry. Sharp blades and slow passes shred the leaves better, speeding up decomposition. Aim for shreds with the consistency of corn flakes.

When there's a deep layer of leaves, it may be necessary to make several passes to chop them fine enough. And while up to 18" of leaves can be mulched, you can't wait to do it all at once. Leaves should be mowed regularly, perhaps as often as every 3-4 days. Consider it another way to add more steps to your day. The visible shreds will settle into the turf within a day or two, especially in rainy weather. If you can see ½" of grass through the mulched leaves, the lawn is getting enough sunlight for photosynthesis.

Mulching every 3-4 days may seem like a lot of work, but for me, it sure beats raking and bagging hundreds and hundreds of pounds of leaves each year for yard waste or, much worse, garbage collection.

A more labor-intensive alternative is moving leaves to a composting site in your yard.

If you've never mulched leaves before, I encourage you to try it. New studies at other universities across the country have validated the earlier research at Purdue and Michigan State.