



## ***SPOTLIGHT ON... YARD WASTE DISPOSAL***

### **Yard Waste Disposal**

Maintaining our lawns and yards means that we have tree limbs, grass, weeds, and plant cuttings to handle. For those who live on bluff lots, the temptation is to throw yard debris and lawn clippings over the bluff. Or maybe you, or your landscaper, do so now. “Why not?” you may ask, “Grass composts quickly, right?” Besides being illegal, with a hefty fine for littering in many locations, there are many other reasons that you should not dump waste over the bluff.

If you use fertilizer or other chemicals on your lawn, those chemicals will make it to the shoreline along with your clippings, killing fragile marine life. Grass without chemicals can be dangerous, too, as the excess nitrogen can raise temperatures and pose a danger to marine life.

Grass clippings dumped over your bluff do not go away, but accumulate and create weight. These clippings do not decompose quickly, since low-oxygen (anaerobic) compost piles don't work like those that are turned and watered frequently. This dumped waste can smother the sturdy native plants that help hold the bank in place, which in turn creates sloughing and potentially cause slides. Even modest amounts of waste on the slopes can create erosion.

What should you do with your lawn clippings and yard waste? One option is to replace your lawn with native plants. If that is not an option, you can take your lawn clippings to the county Solid Waste facility, and dispose of them there. You can create a compost pile, preferably away from the bluff, which could also supply you with clean compost for your garden. Or better yet, you could use a mulching lawn mower, which cuts the grass into fine pieces and leaves them on the lawn.

Another idea to protect your bluff and reduce lawn clippings is to install a 20 foot buffer of native plants between the bluff edge and the lawn or garden. Encourage low-growing natives that won't block your view, and remove saplings and non-native “trash” plants like Scotch broom, English ivy, and Himalayan blackberries. This will now be a low-maintenance, water-free zone that you not only don't have to mow, but will keep the weight from excess watering away from the bluff.

If you live along the beach on a low-bluff or no-bluff location, you should also avoid dumping your clippings onto the beach. The same chemical and nitrogen problems apply, and the grass clippings or waste can smother clam beds and other marine life. Another problem with dumping clippings onto the beach is that some forage fish lay their eggs on the beach at high tide. If you cover these eggs with grass clippings, it can kill them. Salmon feed on forage fish; marine mammals (and people) feed on salmon. You can see how seemingly harmless actions can affect the web of life.



Photo by Joan Gerteis, Island County  
WSU Beach Watcher

If these options won't work, you can create your own compost pile, preferably away from the bluff, which would also supply you with compost for your garden or other yard plants. Alternatively, many counties now offer yard waste recycling for reasonable monthly fees. Check with your local Solid Waste facility to verify that you can deliver and dispose of your yard waste there, and if curbside green waste disposal options are available.

## Taking Care of Summer and Fall Yard Waste

In the past, one of the rites of summer and fall was to gather all the leaves, branches and downed limbs into a big pile and burn them. Some people still do this in areas where it's allowed, though in many locations this is no longer legal, and this option can be hazardous to your health and the environment. Each ton of vegetation that is burned emits 180 pounds of fine particles, carbon dioxide, sulfur dioxide, nitrogen oxide, and volatile organic compounds into the air. This can be bothersome to some people, and can be physically debilitating to folks with respiratory ailments.

One option in disposing of a thin layer of leaves on your lawn is to mow them with your mulching mower, lowering your blade height to about 2". You may need to make a few passes to shred the leaves, and you may need to remove some of the leaf layer to avoid smothering the lawn, which can cause die-back and make the lawn more susceptible to diseases. A light amount of these shredded leaves will decompose, adding nutrients to your soil. Shredded leaves also make great mulch for use around shrubs and trees, or in your vegetable garden. The leaves will retard the growth of weeds, protect against winter freeze, maintain soil moisture, and will improve soil structure and add nutrients as they decompose. One way to create leaf mulch is to put the dry leaves through a chipper-shredder. (Wet leaves can clog the machine.) You can also "mow" a pile of raked leaves, but this works best if you have a grass catcher attachment to contain all the ground-up debris.



*Photos courtesy of Norm Kosky*



Another recommended option for disposing of leaves is to compost them, as they are a good addition to your compost pile. You do not need to shred them, but it may help speed up the rate of decomposition. Since leaves are difficult to compost alone, you should add materials high in nitrogen, such as grass clippings.

If you have room to save some of your leaves, you can use these to mix along with your green materials next spring and summer. For more information on composting, there are many gardening books in the library that cover this subject. You can also find several links on composting on the WSU Waste Wise website:

<http://ext100.wsu.edu/island/composting/>

## Other Alternatives for Yard Waste Disposal



Not everyone has the ability or time to compost their leaves and other fall yard debris; for those people, there are other options available. If you have small branches to get rid of, you might think about renting, borrowing, or buying a chipper-shredder, which you can use to produce valuable mulch for your plants, trees and shrubs. You can also leave branches in a loose pile to provide habitat for birds and other wildlife; see how at <http://www.birdwatching.com/tips/brushpile.html> (Photo of wildlife habitat brush pile in U.K. at left; you can also do this with your branches and limbs.)

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