



Don't Just Throw Them Away! Pile Fallen Leaves for Leaf Mold

by Michelle Le Strange, UC Master Gardener

As leaves fall throughout autumn so starts the constant raking and gathering of leaves for the green waste container. Leaf blower noise permeates the cul-de-sac as driveways and walkways are cleared of all debris. This weekly ritual persists in neighborhoods until the last leaf has fallen.

Perhaps we should keep some of these leaves for use in our own gardens! “Leaf mold” is the term used for a special kind of compost that uses only leaves. It is the result of letting leaves sit in a pile and break down slowly over time. When it is finished you can't even tell that it originated from leaves. The brownish black residue is soft and crumbly like chocolate cake with a very pleasant earthy aroma.

It's so easy to make leaf mold, anybody can do it. You rake leaves into a pile in an inconspicuous area of the yard, add water, and let the pile sit. The only trouble with this approach is that it can take over a year and sometimes longer to end up with finished leaf mold. That's because fallen leaves are basically all carbon, which takes a lot longer to break down than nitrogen rich materials such as grass clippings.

Making leaf mold is a “cold” process, which is different from making compost which is a “hot” process. A compost pile heats up because it is a mix of carbon (brown ingredients) and nitrogen (green ingredients) components, which are digested and broken down by bacteria. Leaf mold is broken down by decomposing fungi and this process plods along slowly. Leaf mold and compost both eventually turn into humus. Humus is the dark, spongy material created when microorganisms break down organic matter.

Another method of making leaf mold is to gather leaves into large plastic bags, stuffing them as full as possible. Before closing the bags, wet the leaves thoroughly with a hose. Shake the bags to distribute the water and then poke a few holes in the bag with a garden fork. Set the bags out of sight and out of direct sunlight (to protect the plastic bags). Check on them every few months,



Getting started

adding water if necessary, and when your leaf mold is ready, you can spread it in different areas of the garden.

You can speed up the “leaf mold” process by chopping leaves into smaller pieces, adding some green leaves or grass clippings in with the fallen leaves, keeping the pile moist, and turning it. You can rake the leaves into rows and then run your lawn mower over them; this chops them up and collects them in a bag all at the same time. Some people contain their leaves in wire or wooden cages.

It needs to be pointed out that not all leaves are alike. Magnolia, holly, and some oak leaves are high in lignin (cellulose), so take longer to break down. Huge leaves like big leaf maple and sycamore take longer than small leaves like Japanese maple, birch or alder, which break down in about 6 months, just in time for summer gardening projects.

Leaf mold is ready to use when it is soft and crumbly. Use it as a soil amendment and conditioner for vegetable and flower gardens or add it to your container potting mix. Mixed in with your garden soil leaf mold will improve soil structure, increase water retention, and provide a super habitat for good soil organisms like earthworms and beneficial bacteria. It does not provide much in the way of soil nutrition, so you will still need to add compost or other fertilizer to increase fertility.



A handful of finished leaf mold

Leaf mold can also be used as a mulch and soil topper. Spread a three-inch layer around perennials, vegetable plants, roses and shrubs, keeping it away from trunks and stems. A thick layer of mulch prevents weed seeds from germinating and moderates fluctuations in soil temperatures. Because it absorbs water quickly, it helps prevent water runoff from your property and shelters plant roots from harsh sun in summer.

Whether you have two trees or ten on your property, instead of carting all your fallen leaves to the curb this autumn, try your hand at a batch of leaf mold. It's simple, free, and good for the earth.

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