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Leaf Litter

by Rosie Bonar, UC Master Gardener

To the home gardener one of fall's most time consuming chores is raking leaves. What does the home gardener do with these leaves? Obviously, there are a few choices. You can rake them and throw them away. You can rake them and do something with them. Or you cannot rake them at all. Let's explore the pros and cons of these choices. After all, raking leaves is a big chore. Maybe it doesn't have to be. No one rakes the leaves in the forest and that seems to work out all right.

Choice number 1: Rake them and throw them away. If this is your choice, put the leaves in the green waste garbage can. The city will turn them into compost. PLEASE avoid putting plastic with the leaves. Don't blow them into the gutter as this clogs the drains and causes problems in the waterways.

Choice number 2: Rake them and do something with them. If the leaves are healthy and pest free they can serve as organic mulch. Why bag your leaves and throw them away and then go to the nursery and buy bags of mulch? Leaf litter is good for the soil and decomposes gradually. (Remember the example of the forest floor?) Apply the mulch to your perennial shrubs to protect them and give them needed nutrients. Put them on top of the spot where you planted your bulbs or to your vegetable garden.

To prepare your leaves for use as mulch, chop them with your lawn mower. You can pile them in a corner to use as needed or even bag them up. You can also use small or chopped leaves in your compost pile. The recipe for compost is half green or nitrogen based material and half brown or carbon based material. Dead leaves are carbon based. All materials that are used for compost should be the size of your thumb for rapid composting, but larger pieces will eventually decompose too.

Choice number 3: Leave the leaves on the ground to decompose. What happens if you don't rake your leaves? It depends. If the leaves were wrinkled or stippled or had holes in them from garden pests, you may be giving those pests a nice warm home to over winter. The leaves could have eggs from thrips, mites, worms, aphids, scale, whiteflies or psyllids that are just waiting to hatch in the spring. But on the bright side they also are home to beneficial insects, so it is sometimes just a balancing act.

Leaf litter is also nice warm hiding place for other critters that could be a problem. Earwigs, springtails, snails and slugs, and sometimes black widow spiders are commonly found in and around leaf litter.



Another problem with not raking is that a thick blanket of leaves on a lawn prevents light from reaching the lawn, which could be problematic, if the lawn is still growing. If your lawn is dormant it shouldn't do it any harm. To avoid a heavy carpet of leaves on your lawn you could mow them instead of raking them. This would break them up into smaller pieces which would decompose easier and allow their nutrients to seep into the ground more quickly.

The choice is yours. It may be that you will use a combination of these leaf control strategies in your yard. Hopefully leaf management won't be just a chore, but something you can enjoy as well.



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