

LEAF COMPOSTING:

Simple, Easy & Valuable

Our number one growing rule on the nursery is pretty simple: Get out of the way! Nature provides the perfect growing plan for all the trees we produce and as growers we do our best to mimic nature's growing practices. With this in mind, finding ways to make the most of the wonderful leaves each fall must be part of any good garden.

Fallen leaves provide a source of water, nutrients and a blanket of root protection during the dormant months keeping soil temperatures more consistent. Think of the effort and expense we put forth in doing all these things for our home gardens year round. On the nursery, before we cover our young trees for the winter, we welcome fallen leaves onto the crops. There is just something special about the natural protection provided each fall season and instead of fighting to remove this leaf cover, we welcome it.

But for the home garden, this can be unsightly and there may be nothing more difficult than cleaning up wet leaves from your garden in the spring. So how can we mimic nature in the home garden and landscape by making the most of the treasure provided each fall and at the same time reduce the burden on our landfills and the expense of removing fallen leaves?

Leaf composting provides the answer and it is not nearly as difficult as you may think. Of course like anything else, you can become a composting expert, but this is not at all required to become a good steward of your home environment. Leaf composting can be completed in as little as two weeks and the end product is gold to your garden.

Leaf compost added to your soil provides wonderful organic matter, nutrient sources, air space and water holding benefits. I am sure I do not have to convince you of the benefits of composting. I think my hope is to convince you of the simplicity and ease of composting.

To compost still requires raking and gathering in some fashion (both activities good exercise by the way). The important factor to quick leaf composting is shredding of the leaves, either through your mower or a shredder. This greatly reduces space needs, blowing, matting and it quickens decomposition. Needed for decomposition are water, air, and nitrogen. Try to limit your shredded leaf pile to maybe 3' x 3' or what you think you can handle.

Air is provided by turning your compost every three or four days and by shredding. Your compost pile can remain a very manageable size so you can simply fluff up and mix your pile. Composting takes place from the inside out.

Water is usually sufficiently supplied by natural rainfall. During dryer weeks at time of fluffing, you may find it necessary to add water to keep it moist to the touch, but not soaking wet.

Nitrogen can be provided by adding "green!" Grass clippings, green leaves or manure. Of course, you can visit your local garden center for other natural sources of nitrogen to promote the process. When adding grass clippings to your simple compost, a good ratio may be about three parts leaves to one part grass clippings.

The end product in just two weeks will be a fantastic, all natural, and beneficial soil additive or mulch product that is also attractive! Your leaf compost can retain 300 to 500 times its weight in water as compared to regular soils of two times its weight. Adding this compost to your gardens is like adding a slow drip irrigation system. You'll enjoy these benefits with reduced watering in the summer months for sure.

Your leaf compost will contain about twice the nutrients as composted manures, a great slow release source for your garden and landscape. Leaf compost also makes for a great fall mulching product to provide additional winter protection.

If you have difficulties of any kind, the problems are very simple to identify. If a strong or foul odor is noticed in your pile, you're simply not providing enough air. Turn your pile more frequently and more aggressively. If the pile center is dry, add more water. If only the center of your pile is warm, make the pile larger. If the pile isn't heating up inside, we need to increase our source of nitrogen, add more grass clippings. And to avoid pests, keep this compost pile free from other materials like household scraps.

With some minor effort, very minor effort, you can solve all the problems associated with fall leaf disposal while at the same time provide your garden and landscape with nature's own growing plan, the best plan, always!

- Don Eaton
Pennsylvania Pride Grow Team