



Autumn Leaves – Managing a Valuable Resource

It's getting time for fall leaves to start covering our yards and patios. This year, as we dig out the rakes and lawn tools, consider this: leaves are actually a very valuable resource, and how we manage them in our lawn affects the health of our yard, our landfills, and our planet. Traditional methods of blowing leaves into the street and/or bagging leaves and placing them curbside for garbage collection are proving to be very ineffective ways of managing leaves. These methods not only clog our water systems and landfills, they also discard the very nutrients most of us work hard to introduce into our yards.

Don't Bag 'Em or Blow 'Em

During the year, at least 20 percent of the solid waste generated by Texans comes from grass clippings, tree leaves, and other landscape wastes. Bagging these materials and placing them into the curbside garbage collection system uses valuable landfill space, removes nutrients from the environment, and costs cities and the people of Texas more in increased taxes and service fees. Of the landscape waste, approximately half is composed of tree leaves.*

The City of Benbrook employs a street sweeper to keep public streets clean and free of debris. The sweeper is scheduled to clean all city streets about twice a month. Excessive leaves in the streets can make the process take three times as long as normal street sweeping. Blowing or raking leaves into the street is a municipal code violation, and fills up the street sweeper quickly, often clogging the machine, resulting in more trips to the landfill. In addition, leaf piles can cover rocks or other unseen items that may damage the street sweeping equipment.

Blowing or raking leaves into the street can also clog the storm drain system and catch basins, which can cause flooding during heavy rains. Unclogging the storm drain is costly and time-consuming.

Mow 'Em to Help Grow 'Em

Leaves contain 50 to 80 percent of the nutrients a plant extracts from the soil and air during its growing season. The tree leaves that accumulate in and around our landscapes represent a valuable natural resource that can be used to provide a good source of organic matter and nutrients for our lawns.

A light covering of leaves can be mowed, leaving the shredded leaves in place on the lawn. This technique is most effective when a mulching mower is used. In fact, during times of light leaf drop or if there are only a few small trees on a landscape, this technique is probably the most efficient and easiest way to manage leaf accumulation. Even grass clippings left on the lawn have been shown to add valuable nutrients back to the turf.

Mulching leaves allows them to be used in vegetable gardens, flower beds, and around shrubs and trees. As an option to raking, a lawnmower with a bagging attachment provides a fast and easy way to shred and collect the leaves. Leaves that have been mowed or run through some other type of shredder will decompose faster and are much more likely to remain in place than un-shredded leaves. Applying a 3-inch layer of shredded leaves around the base of trees, shrubs, and annual or perennial flower beds introduces healthy nutrients to plants, improves aeration, and conserves moisture....adding up to a naturally beautiful landscape.

For more information about mulching, composting, and other leaf management techniques, visit: <http://tinyurl.com/dyngjan>.

*AgriLife Extension – Texas A&M System.