

Fall Leaves: The Ecstasy...and the Agony

The urban forest of Shaker Heights is something to behold in the fall. Many tree species show off leaves of different sizes, shapes, and colors creating a natural setting of extraordinary beauty. The leaves and the canopy they create are useful in providing refreshing shade and cooler temperatures in the early fall heat, and they capture and hold the water of the autumnal rains, which mitigates flooding.

As the show of autumnal color fades, and the leaves begin to fall, the relentless hard work of leaf raking begins. Or does it?

Consider this: Leaf litter is incredibly effective natural, free mulch. This means you don't have to work so hard to remove every last fallen leaf.

Leaf litter suppresses weeds, regulates soil temperature and moisture, and reduces soil erosion. As it decomposes it provides nutrients to the soil.

Leaf litter is also beneficial to wildlife. It provides shelter for butterflies that overwinter in egg, larval, and adult stages, as well as insects such as lady bugs and spiders. It is also home to frogs, toads, and salamanders. In the spring, birds forage through leaf litter for crucial insect nutrition.

So how do you reap the benefits of tree litter without damaging grass and shrubs? While you can simply rake leaves into flower and vegetable garden beds, as well as areas around trees and shrubs, you should avoid leaving thick clumps of leaves on the grass and in beds. For faster decomposition, shred leaves using a mower with a collecting bag and then distribute the leaf litter throughout your yard. In the spring, gently rake the leaf litter in flower beds to loosen it, and mix it into the soil of annual and vegetable beds.

Of course, with our vast urban forest, there can be an over-abundance of leaves in the yard. For those leaves that need to be removed by the City, please remember:

- Pile leaves on the tree lawn, well away from tree trunks and tree roots to protect them from damage by leaf removal equipment.
- Never put leaves in the street. Doing so is hazardous for bikes and cars and could block the catch basin and cause road flooding.

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