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### **So Many Leaves – What do I do with Them?**

“Fall has always been my favorite season. The time when everything bursts with its last beauty, as if nature had been saving up all year for the grand finale.”

— Lauren DeStefano, Wither

There are leaves everywhere in our yard! Yesterday, I enjoyed watching them fall in the woods behind our home – it was absolutely gorgeous. However, the leaves are also piling up under our maples in the front yard, scattering across the lawn, and nestling themselves in my perennial beds that haven’t been cut down yet. As we live in the country, I don’t worry about have them all raked up, but I still need to do something with certain areas where the leaves have become quite thick. But instead of shoving those piles of leaves into bags to be taken to a landfill, let’s look at some alternative uses.

Leaves have high mineral content, which help keep the soil fertile and organically rich. They also feed earthworms and improve soil structure. The best way to reap these benefits is to simply mix in shredded leaves right into your garden. Next spring you’ll have lots of earthworms and beneficial organisms and microbes. In the past, I raked up small piles so my husband can run them over with a lawnmower. I then collected those chopped leaves and spread them on my perennial beds. I now use a portable shredder with a bag, but the premise is still the same. If you decide to add shredded leaves directly to your soil, add some slow-release nitrogen fertilizer to help the leaves decompose even faster.

Another way to use leaves is add them to your compost pile (or make a compost pile if you don’t already have one.) Add an inch of high-nitrogen “green” material such as grass clippings or kitchen scraps to every three to four inches of old leaves. This “green” material will feed the bacteria that will break down the leaves. Don’t allow the pile to dry out, turn it several times during the winter, and come next spring you should have some nice compost for your garden.

If composting seems too hard, you can simply pile them up to create leaf mold. Shred them to make the breakdown process go faster. The leaves still need to stay moist. Other than that, you simply leave the pile alone and, in a year or so, you’ll have a nice batch of leaf mold high in nutrients, ready to spread on your garden.

Use leaves as mulch. In this case, you really should shred or chop them as you don’t want them to mat, preventing water from penetrating. Use the leaves around various berries, in the vegetable garden and around ornamental plants to prevent weeds and provide insulation.

Your lawn can use chopped leaves as fertilizer. Just run the lawn mower over the yard while the leaves are fallen. This will breakdown the leaves into smaller pieces, provide your grass with some much-needed nutrients.

Of course, leave some leaves to provide a home for the beneficial insects. There are numerous bees, butterflies, and other insects that use the leaves as protection from the cold and other predators. In this case, leave the leaves whole. Just leave them in your perennial beds until spring.

If you too have an abundance of fallen leaves, consider some of these uses in your garden. Before I chop ours up, I’m going rake up a pile for our grandson to jump in first. You know what they say about all work and no play.

This week’s article is written by Jeannie Manis, a Wisconsin Certified Sauk County Master Gardener Volunteer. If you have any gardening questions, please contact the Extension Sauk County by emailing to [tripp@wisc.edu](mailto:tripp@wisc.edu) or calling the University of Wisconsin Madison Division of Extension Sauk County office at 608-355-3250.