

Stop: Think before raking the leaves on your lawn

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By David W. Marshall
November 1, 2001

Ahhh . . . cooler weather at last!

The lawn has almost quit growing. The days are beautiful. It seems to be fall, and the tree leaves are starting to do just that . . . fall.

Before you start wearing blisters on your hands raking leaves, think if maybe there's a better way to deal with all those leaves.

First, examine your home landscape. Are there places under the trees where the grass isn't growing well? If so, put the leaves there. If you do, you may find that you don't need to move the leaves very far. In many areas you will find that you can just let the leaves lie where they fall, creating self-mulching areas.

You may want to grow grass there, but if there isn't grass growing there now, there's probably a good reason. Southern lawn-grasses just don't grow well under the shade of trees. St. Augustine grass is our most shade-tolerant lawngrass. But even St. Augustine won't grow well when faced with heavy shade and root competition from trees, especially if there are other factors involved, such as frequent foot traffic.

If you continue to try and grow grass beneath trees where it is too shaded, the soil will eventually erode away to the point where large tree roots are exposed. To prevent this from happening, take a cue from trees in the woods. Mother Nature has a rather good plan worked out. The leaves fall to the ground beneath the trees, protecting the soil and the roots. As they decompose, they even recycle nutrients back to the tree.

You do not want to lose your topsoil to erosion because it is bad for your trees and bad for the community. The topsoil washes from your landscape onto your neighbor's property, into the streets or into the storm-water system. Phosphorus is bound to many of these soil particles, which can end up polluting our lakes. Our community just spent about \$8 million removing phosphorus from Lake Jackson sediment. Let's not send more phosphorus into the lakes.

There are two steps we should take to make sure we're not contributing to future phosphorus problems: We should be using fertilizers that contain no phosphorus (the middle number in the fertilizer analysis). 15-0-15, for example, is a good fertilizer to use for many purposes. We also should have no areas of bare soil in our yards. If there's not a grass or groundcover growing there, make sure the ground is mulched with leaves. This will greatly reduce erosion.

If you allow the formation of self-mulching areas in your yard, you'll also find that you have less work to do and have healthier trees. Mulch also protects tree roots and trunks from the nicks and scrapes of mowers and weed-eaters.

So, leaves can be valuable. But, what about when leaves fall on areas where the lawn is growing well and you want to maintain the lawn?

Just use the bagging attachment on your lawn mower to collect the leaves from the lawn. Then pile them to the

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self-mulching areas beneath your trees. Or, you can use the leaf mulch around shrubs or young trees that may be in other areas. You could even start a compost pile. The compost that forms will be useful as a soil amendment when you prepare new planting beds.

One word of caution about using mulches. You can overdo anything, even something as good as mulching. The mulch layer shouldn't exceed a depth of 2 to 3 inches once it settles. And, keep it much thinner within six to eight inches of the bottom of the plant. You don't want moisture retained against the trunks.

What about the acidity of leaves or pine needles? They don't have that great an effect on soil acidity. Besides, many of our plants prefer acidic soils.

So, this fall, use those leaves wisely. You'll find that some of the plants that sprout in the mulched areas are desirable tree seedlings, wildflowers or shrubs. The ones that you don't want can easily be controlled with a shot of Roundup or Finale, a pass with the weed-eater, or even a high mowing just a few times a year.

It sure beats weekly mowing, and think of all the time you'll save raking and bagging leaves.

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