We’re all looking forward to cooler weather, and with that comes leaves changing color and falling into our yards and onto our lawns. Not a weekend goes by when I don’t see homeowners and landscapers raking yards and stuffing plastic bags full of leaves to be left on the curb to be picked up by Waste Management and hauled to the land fill. “So,” you say, “what’s wrong with this picture?”

We’re getting educated about not flushing old prescriptions because we’ve learned those old drugs end up in our water supply. Believe it or not, leaves and yard debris supply nutrients (which are like vitamins for us) for our existing lawns – prescriptions for good yard health, if you will. Bagging them and leaving them for the garbage collectors is tantamount to flushing drugs down the toilet. It costs taxpayers money each time that garbage is hauled to the landfill – money you and I would like to conserve.

However, raking our yards is an ingrained cultural practice. For decades we “babyboomers” and our parents have dutifully raked and bagged leaves, and it just doesn’t seem right to some of us to “leave the leaves.” Does the appearance of an unraked yard reflect on the homeowner? What if the leaves blow into the neighbor’s yard? What if the yard looks “messy”?

What really bothers me the most is the practice of raking leaves off of bare tree roots and leaving the soil exposed, causing more and more erosion into water bodies. I live in the Lake Jackson basin, and we all know the millions of dollars Leon County spent to dredge silt off the lake bottom that was the result of erosion from surrounding neighborhoods and commercial developments. One morning on my walk I saw a landscaper actually raking up grass cuttings
from a lawn and putting them in bags. I couldn’t resist. I told him I was a Master Gardener and I had noticed large amounts of bare spots on the lawn. I suggested he dump the grass cuttings on the bare spots, instead, to see what happens, figuring he would think I was a bit batty. Oddly enough, on my way home, I saw that he actually had done that. It’s less hard work and the lawn will benefit.

So what do we do with our leaves?

* Chop them up with your lawn mower and let them sit on and nourish your grass.
* Build mulch beds under your trees with your leaves. Letting grass grow right up to the tree trunk causes the grass to compete with your tree roots for nutrients and moisture. Mulch beds will also recycle nutrients, build soil, cut down on weeds, AND you’ll risk less damage to the bark of your trees if you don’t mow or weed-whack right up to the trunks.
* Find bare spots in your yard and on exposed tree roots and put your leaf mulch there.
* Use leaves as mulch in your vegetable gardens and flower beds, or if you know gifted gardeners, donate your mulch to them.

Remember: Leave the leaves!