Trimming and weeding and mulching and mowing, raking and planting to watch the things growing. Bag it all up and tie it with string, these are some things I love about spring!

But wait! STOP! Don’t bag up your yard debris. University of Florida IFAS Leon County Extension and Leon County’s Recycling Department encourage you to recycle it in your home landscape. Your so-called yard debris contains valuable organic materials.

You have read about the many benefits of recycling fallen leaves as mulch. You have heard that it’s best to keep your grass clippings on your lawn. You probably even know how a brushpile of limbs in your backyard provides cover for birds and small animals.

But do you know what happens to your yard debris if you bag it up and put it out on the street for collection? Bagged leaves and piles of limbs come to the County’s Solid Waste Management Facility for processing.

Since November 2009, over 2,300 tons of leaves in plastic bags ended up at the Solid Waste Facility on Apalachee Parkway. Another 1,700 tons of “clean” yard debris came in. “Clean” refers to yard debris without plastic bags. Clean yard debris can be mulched right away. Mulched yard debris is used on-site at the Solid Waste Facility for daily cover and erosion control. Any surplus mulch is available free to Leon County residents for use in your yards.

The bagged yard debris is costly to process. Leon County pays $18.80 per ton to de-bag, haul and grind plastic-bagged yard debris and leaves. So, since November, it has cost us $43,240 to process these bags of yard debris.
Some residents’ yards are full of trees and produce many leaves. “Leave it lay” should be our new mantra, pun intended. Use a mulching blade on your mower and keep the leaves on your lawn. Your lawn will be healthier as these mulched leaves break down and enrich your soil. Or use the mower to chop and blow the leaves into bare areas where you can use the mulch. It is the circle of life, and it is less work for you than bagging.

Another use for your yard leaves is in a compost bin or pile. Carbon rich leaves mixed with nitrogen rich fruit and vegetable scraps from your kitchen break down into a rich, dark soil amendment. Add this material to your flowerbeds and vegetable gardens to grow the prettiest flowers and best vegetables you have ever had. Nature has been working this way since time began.

If you must put leaves and grass clippings at the curb, consider containing the leaves in paper yard bags (available at ACE hardware stores or Esposito’s) or cardboard boxes. Paper bags and cardboard boxes mulched with the leaves will degrade to usable compost over time.

Shrubs and limbs placed curbside should follow these guidelines. The maximum limb size is six feet long. The maximum limb diameter is four inches. The pile should not exceed four feet in height or four feet in depth. Bring limbs exceeding curbside limits to the 7550 Apalachee Parkway facility. Tipping fees will apply.

Residents interested in seeing the process in action can call 606-1827 to schedule a tour of the facility. Tours run Tuesday through Friday between 9:00 a.m. and 4:00 p.m.

But please consider using your yard debris on your own landscape before placing it curbside. This saves you money, cuts the county’s costs, and helps the environment, both in your own backyard and across the county.

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