

[Nature in the Neighborhood – October 2020]

Leave the Leaves!

The air is cooler, the days perceptively shorter, and the leaves on the trees are starting to fall. Time to start raking. Or is it? There's a movement afoot encouraging homeowners to skip the raking or blowing of leaves and just leaving them where they fall. The National Wildlife Federation urges us to "leave the leaves" – that is, let them stay on the ground to decompose throughout the fall and winter.

<https://www.nwf.org/en/Magazines/National-Wildlife/2015/OctNov/Gardening/Leave-the-Leaves>

Why would the National Wildlife Federation (NWF) be suggesting this? Turns out, fallen leaves create a natural mulch, adding organic matter and nutrients to the soil. Leaf litter also provides wildlife habitat. "Critters ranging from turtles and toads to birds, mammals and invertebrates rely on leaf litter for food, shelter and nesting material. Many moth and butterfly caterpillars overwinter in fallen leaves before emerging in spring."

If these aren't reasons enough, consider that the time you spend raking could be better spent out and about with family and friends enjoying the Fall weather. If you hire a landscaping company, think of the money you could be saving.

Here are a few of the NWF's tips:

- Rake leaves off the lawn to use as mulch in garden beds.
- Let leaves stay where they fall. They won't hurt your lawn if you chop them with a mulching mower.
- Let leaf piles decompose; the resulting leaf mold can be used as a soil amendment to improve structure and water retention.
- Make compost: Combine fallen leaves ("brown material") with grass clippings and other "green material" and keep moist and well mixed. You'll have nutrient-rich compost to add to your garden next spring.

One picture (or in this case, one video) is worth a thousand words, so I invite you to view this short video by Michigan State University on mowing and mulching the leaves on your lawns: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2lj1ZydTEYc>

A Word about Leaf Blowers

An increasingly common method to deal with fallen leaves is to use leaf blowers to corral them into piles for pickup – or, as I have witnessed, to blow them over into your neighbor’s yard! There can be no argument that leaf blowers are noisy. Annoyingly noisy. There can also be no argument that the gas-powered models are extremely polluting, harmful to both humans and the environment. The airborne particulates they emit and that we breath in may contain dust, mold, pollen, chemicals from herbicides and pesticides, and animal feces. This presents a particular problem for landscape crews who spend the day breathing in this particulate matter; as they may be unaware of the hazards, it also in some cases raises social and environmental justice issues. Further, the emissions from gas powered engines, such as carbon monoxide and non-methane hydrocarbon, contribute to global warming. As for your garden, the use of leaf blowers can blow away and erode topsoil, resulting in damage to plants’ roots. They can also compact soil making it hard for air and water to permeate down into the ground. In short, not good for you, the environment, or your garden.

Because of COVID-19, more and more of people are working at home and having to deal with the irritating whine of leaf blowers and the dust particles which they create. At least one community, Larchmont, NY, has taken action. The village has banned noisy, polluting, gas blowers. <https://larchmontloop.com/larchmont-bans-gas-powered-leaf-blowers/> The ban is effective starting in 2022 thereby giving residents and landscapers time to plan for alternatives – such as electric leaf blowers which are far less noisy and less polluting. Swampscott tried once to pass a bylaw addressing leaf blowers, but it did not pass. As they say, if at first you don’t succeed ... Perhaps now is the time to try again.

There is a growing awareness today of the environmental impacts of landscaping practices. Shredding leaves where they are on the lawn, or adding them to compost

pile, or leaving them under trees and in garden beds are ways that you can help nature in our neighborhood.