

Leaf Recycling

Solid Waste Management Fact Sheet No. 12

Managing Leaf Drop

Tree and shrub leaves contain valuable nutrients, providing a good source of organic matter which should be returned to the soil. A light covering of fallen leaves can be mowed, leaving the shredded leaves in place on a lawn. This technique is most effective if a mulching mower is used or when baffles are attached to conventional mowers. However, mowing the lawn is not an effective method of leaf management when a heavy leaf cover is present. Removing the leaves is then required. These leaves and other yard wastes, such as grass clippings, small twigs, pruning debris or dead plants, can be a valuable landscape resource when used as a mulch or when composted.

Using Leaves as Compost

A mulch is any material applied to the soil surface for protection or improvement of the area covered. A layer of leaves applied to the surface of the soil as a mulch around trees, shrubs, in flower beds and in vegetable gardens will:

- conserve soil moisture
- control weeds and grasses
- reduce soil erosion
- prevent soil crusting
- eliminate lawn mower disease—damage caused by mowing or trimming too close to young trees

Passing yard waste through a shredder creates a more uniform mulch material. A string trimmer (or weed wacker) shreds dry leaves very quickly when inserted into a trash can partially filled with leaves. This also reduces the volume by over 50 percent and speeds up decomposition.

Using Leaves as Compost

Compost is a dark, crumbly, and earth-smelling form of organic matter that has gone through a natural decomposition process. Decomposition and recycling of organic wastes are an essential part of soil building and healthy plant growth in forests and pastures, as well as our lawns and gardens. The process of decomposition or composting can be carried out in simple compost piles, bins or more elaborate homemade or purchased devices.

Composting leaves and other landscape wastes can be used to:

- add a natural source of nutrients to soil
- loosen tight, heavy clay soils
- help sandy soil retain moisture and nutrients
- add to potting soils for container plants
- shredded leaves' high carbon content complement grass clippings' high nitrogen content
- to create a balanced, fast-working compost pile

During the year, at least 20 percent of the solid waste generated by Kansans comes from grass clippings, tree leaves and other landscape wastes. Bagged and placed into the curbside garbage collection system, they use valuable landfill space, remove nutrients from the environment, and cost cities and their taxpayers more in increased taxes and service costs.

Help Reduce Landscape Waste

Help reduce the strain on your communities' waste disposal systems and protect our environment. Recycle and reuse all organic landscape wastes rather than sending them into landfill.

Prepared by
Charles W. Marr

Extension Horticulturist, Vegetable Crops

Robert I. Neier
Sedgwick County Extension Agent, Horticulture



Cooperative Extension Service
Kansas State University
Manhattan, Kansas

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