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Managing Fall Leaves

As fall approaches and the leaves start to turn, we are once again faced with what to do with all those beautiful leaves after they have fallen from the trees and are blanketing our lawns.

Raking, hauling, bagging, and disposing of tree leaves has been an annual event for homeowners and turf managers for many years. But in 1994 a law banned grass clippings, tree leaves, branches and twigs from all landfills in Michigan. These items are considered yard waste and, prior to 1994, it accounted for approximately 20 to 25 percent of Michigan's throw-away trash. Anyone who has a yard knows that disposal of yard waste can present a challenge now that it can no longer be set out in bags with the weekly trash.

Burning fallen leaves used to be standard practice across North America, but most municipalities now ban or discourage the incendiary practice due to the air pollution it causes.

Fortunately, there are other choices. A few municipalities and private businesses have developed composting centers to process this material. If this option is not available you can compost them yourself. This is basically a process in which the leaves are broken down by mixing them with plant materials and other types of items.

But an even simpler method is to simply mow them. Michigan State University researchers have found that mowing these leaves back into the turf is an appropriate alternative. In these studies, more than 6 inches of tree leaves have been mulched into lawn turf. Several types of leaves have been used, such as oak and maple, with no adverse effects on lawn turf. Reports from professional turf managers who have been practicing this technique on golf courses and commercial turf have been positive.

A couple of passes with the mower greatly reduces volume and exposes more leaf surfaces to speed up decomposition. The leaf residue will be evident after mowing, but it will sift into the turf within a few weeks and will be unnoticeable in the spring. You can even rake leaves that accumulate in planting beds, fence lines or other areas out into the lawn and mow them. For best results, use a mulching mower, raise your mowing height to better accommodate the tree leaves and mow when the leaves are dry.

Shredded leaves can also be knifed (lightly dug) into annual flower or vegetable gardens making a good organic fertilizer and soil conditioner. Or during the spring planting season, leftover mulched leaves can be used to lessen seedling injury caused by late freezes and to smother emerging weeds. Recycling nutrients will reduce the total amount of nitrogen fertilizer needed by the yard and garden each growing season.

Often there is resistance to a new method—people are afraid to try. But this is definitely a win-win situation—less work now, and a more environmentally friendly yard next summer.

For more information:

Michigan State University Extension Bulletin E12TURF May 2002

<http://www.turf.msu.edu/managing-yard-waste-to-preserve-water-quality>

Managing Leaves and Yard Trimmings - University of Wisconsin–Extension in cooperation with the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources

<http://clean-water.uwex.edu/pubs/pdf/managlt.pdf>

Healthy Alternatives to Burning Fallen Leaves

<http://agreenliving.net/autumn-leaves-healthy-alternatives-to-burning-fallen-leaves/>