

# Don't Let the Pretty Fall Leaves Stink Up Our Watershed!

## The Leaf Problem

The beautiful vivid colors of autumn's leaves are one of Western's Pennsylvania's most prized assets. On our properties, however, leaves can become a nuisance. In the fall, particularly in October and November, we all struggle to figure out the best way to dispose of leaves on our property. The temptation is to just sweep up the leaves onto the street. The problem, however, with this out of sight out of mind mentality is that leaves dumped into the street, will eventually fall into our storm sewers. The leaf debris, carrying fertilizers and pesticides, combined with other yard waste, eventually gets carried into lakes and rivers, and this waste is untreated and unfiltered. Once in the water this debris releases phosphorus, which promotes the growth of algae blooms that degrade water quality, harming lake and river ecosystems and aquatic life. Leaf debris can also clog culverts, storm drains and pipes, increasing the risk of flooding during heavy rains. There are many alternatives to taking care of the leaves on our property in a responsible and safe way to protect our watercourses!

### Off Site Disposal Options for Leaves

- A private refuse hauler may haul away your leaves for a fee.
- Many municipalities hold scheduled leaf pick up days. Check your municipality's web-site or contact them by telephone to see if this program is in effect in your community.
- There are several composting facilities in Southwestern Pennsylvania that will accept leaf waste and yard debris. Check out the EPA directory at the link below: <http://www.epa.gov/reg3wcmd/composting/>

### Please, Do Not Burn Leaves!

Leaf burning has often been viewed as a fall tradition, but it is also illegal under the federal Clean Air Act and the Pennsylvania Air Pollution Control Act. Though there are some exemptions to this law, if you live in a densely populated or urban community, there is a good chance your municipality has an ordinance prohibiting leaf burning. Along with leaf burning being illegal, it is very damaging to our air quality and studies show a connection between high levels of particulate pollution, released from smoke, with chronic coughs and respiratory illnesses. It is particularly troubling for those who suffer from asthma, so please do not burn leaves!

## Leaf Mulching and Composting: Fall Leaves Can Be A Great Tool for Your Garden

### Benefits of Leaves in the Garden

- The leaves of one shade tree equate to as much as \$50 worth of plant food and humus.
- Leaves hold 300% their weight in water making them a great way to keep soil moist in the heat of summer.
- Leaves decompose slowly and release their nutrients over time, improving the structure of the soil.
- Leaves are an inexpensive and very beneficial mulch that you can use around trees, shrubs, or in flower and vegetable gardens.
- Leaves protect against temperature fluctuations and cold weather in the winter. When the leaves eventually decompose, nutrients will be added to the soil and the soil structure will be improved.

### The Basics of Composting: Turning Leaves into Mulch

#### Keys to Successful Composting

1. Organic Materials: A good mix will consist of three parts leaves and one part greens such as fresh grass clippings and garden prunings.
2. Moisture: Composting materials should feel moist but not overly soggy.
3. Temperature: Compost should feel warm to the touch except in the cold winter months.
4. Air: To prevent unpleasant odors that can occur when materials decompose without oxygen, compost should be turned regularly to ensure that air is reaching the center of the pile.

#### Materials Needed for Composting

1. Yard Waste, Space, and Enthusiasm!
2. Compost piles do not need to be enclosed, although many people use a bin or similar enclosure.
3. Compost bins can be purchased or you can easily construct one with basic materials such as chicken wire, snow fencing, lumber or used pallets.

#### Getting Started on Your Compost

A 4X4X4 foot area out of direct sunlight is ideal for your compost pile. Choose an easily accessible spot on a grass or soil base. Organic materials should be mixed, adding water as needed so that materials feel like a moist wrung out sponge. The compost pile should be turned after a few weeks so that the outside layers are exchanged with the center of the pile. Turn compost piles about once per month, except in cold weather. Water can be added during turning if necessary. Be sure to not compost diseased leaves.

#### Using Compost

Compost is ready to be used when it looks dark and crumbly and none of the starting ingredients are visible. One way to test if compost is finished, is to seal a small sample in a plastic bag for 24 to 48 hours. If no strong odors are released when you open the bag, the compost is ready to be used as mulch.