

Natural South Marysburgh

Waiting for Snow to Cover the Leaves

Winter is in the offing. Everyone has finished the annual leaf ceremony—raking, mulching, composting, leaf blowing, burning them, or just leaving them where they fell for wintering insects. Your choice.

I once led a hike on a gorgeous property adjacent to Cape Vesey Falls. The owners lived under a forest of trees and falling leaves. Their house was blanketed in leaves, their driveway and their lawn unrecognizable. Yet, the owners of this property treated these leaves like gold. They spread out a large tarpaulin, raked the leaves onto it, and then dragged their harvest of leaves to their garden, using their efforts as fertilizer and compost. They learned how to make use of a complementary product.

At my home, I waited for almost five decades for leaves so I could do much the same thing. Some are added annually to a large compost pile, and some are used to insulate sensitive garden plants. Others are left where they fall. The majority of the leaves, however, are ground into dust with my recycling mower, forcing the pulverized material into the soil to provide nutrients. Almost daily, I am mulching these leaves here and there around my two-acre property, until the last leaf has fallen from the trees.



Ignoring large quantities of leaves that fall every autumn onto a prized lawn is not a wise option. Leaves that are not removed or ground up with a mulching mower will block sunlight and air from reaching the grass. Rain and early snowfalls accentuate the problem by turning these fluffy layers of leaves into soggy mats. The resulting lack of air circulation can smother the grass or attract disease.

In the soil there are micro-organisms that go right to work in utilizing the leaves that I have pulverized by breaking them

down even further so they can be used by the grass. The decomposing leaves cover any bare spots between the blades of grass, thereby making it more difficult for weeds to emerge in the spring. Studies apparently have found that there can be a major decrease in some unwanted weeds after mulching fall leaves after only three years.

Mulching mowers are more than just conventional mowers with the side discharge chute blocked off; they have specially designed blades that work efficiently to pulverize the leaves into a fine, almost dusty material. I have mulched in all kinds of weather and conditions, but the best job can be done right after a heavy frost when the leaves are brittle. Personally, I don't like to leave the job that long, as I am anxious to service my mowers and put them to bed for the winter by sharpening the blades, stabilizing the gas, changing the oil, and cleaning up the machines with my air compressor.

Mostly, I recycle leaves because it is the responsible thing to do on my property. My philosophy has always been to re-use everything that Nature has provided. This applies also to tree limbs that I prune annually. Some are put through a wood chipper to be used as mulch around the trees, while others are added to a brush pile to serve as wildlife habitat. Still others serve as tinder for an outdoor fire pit that I enjoy whenever I am sitting outside under my maple tree. Everything is used, and branches produced in my yard, stay in my yard.

Back to the issue of leaves though, I have always found the whole exercise of leaf drop very fascinating. It marks the close of the fall season, accented by a riot of autumn colours. The ceremony, of course, is a deliberate action on the part of a tree, as it helps the tree survive the cold. No longer can the tree afford to lose moisture through transpiration as it did during summer. It must preserve any moisture that it can get through winter, so it must drop its leaves. I have been trained to believe that in Nature everything happens for a reason. Why beech trees retain their dead leaves through winter has always been a mystery that I continue to research. But, in Nature, if we knew all the answers, the enjoyment of Nature would lose its appeal very quickly.

The fall colour, the unique shapes of leaves peculiar to each species, their photosynthesis, the heady autumn fragrance of decomposing leaves, their usefulness in our lives, and the entire fascinating process from spring through fall. No need to worry now about the leaves; it's the snow now that we have to worry about, and where to put it.

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