If You Do Not like To Rake Leaves

Phil Blevins
Extension Agent, Agriculture
Washington County, Virginia

The shade provided by landscape trees provides many benefits for homeowners. One of those is the beautiful colors they display in the fall. That beauty signals the time when all deciduous trees will lose their leaves. Large volumes of leaves make it necessary to do something for the health of the grass in our lawns. Traditionally, homeowners have raked and disposed of these leaves in one manner or another. However, research has demonstrated that leaves can be mulched with a lawnmower and left of the lawn with no adverse effects. Consider this information from Dr. Mike Goatley, Turf Specialist, at Virginia Tech.

Numerous university research reports have detailed how leaf mulching affects turf performance. In almost every instance, the results show that chopping up deciduous leaves as part of a regular mowing schedule is an effective means of managing these leaves without harming the turf. "Leaf Mulching Effects on Turf Performance," a research report from Purdue University, does an excellent job detailing the responses of a perennial ryegrass lawn turf to the application of up to 4,000 pounds of maple leaves per acre in a single application. Mulching the leaves had no undesirable effects on turf quality or color, growth, thatch accumulation, soil pH, weed populations, or disease pressure. The general assessment was that mulching was overall very positive and economical.

Consider the following issues before using leaf mulching in turf as a method of leaf disposal. While mulching mowers are preferred because they have special deck and/or blade designs to mulch clippings, almost any rotary mower unit can suffice. Mulching moist leaves minimizes dust concerns, but if leaves are too wet, it increases the strain on your mower's engine and does not chop the leaves into small pieces that easily decompose in the soil.

There is only so much leaf matter that the mower can handle at one time, so use some common sense regarding how many leaves can be effectively mulched in a single mowing event. Research from Michigan State University indicates that a depth of up to 6 inches of leaves can be successfully mulched at a time. This will vary depending on the size and performance of your mower. Multiple passes with your mower might be required to thoroughly chop leaves. The Michigan State research also touted an overall reduction in dandelions and crabgrass over time because the leaf mulch covered any voids in the turf where the weeds would germinate in the future!