

Falling for You (published 2026-11-14)
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Fall is such a beautiful season. The days are cooler, the humidity is lower - it's a great time to be outdoors. Avid gardeners know it's also time to take advantage of fallen leaves, clean out any remaining plants that are done for the season, and freshen beds with mulch.

There is something very special about fallen leaves. They are valuable, multipurpose resources for gardeners. Rake them whole or shredded into your garden beds to act as as mulch. They'll help retain moisture, suppress weed growth, help keep plant roots warmer during the cold days, and can help prevent soil erosion. For tender perennials, a wire cage around the plant filled with leaves helps them survive the winter. That extra warmth makes a huge difference.

Once you've mulched with the leaves, the leftovers are a great addition to compost piles. Or, you can make leaf mold. Place whole or shredded leaves in a wire frame to break down over the winter and become rich compost. If you shred leaves they'll break down faster. So, if you want them to provide their nutrients for the next spring, shred them. If you watch gardening shows, you know some of those folks love their leaf mold.

But that's not all.

As leaves break down, they return nutrients to the soil. They also help to lighten clay soil and aid in moisture retention. As such, they are free, natural compost as well as mulch when you add them to garden beds. They can serve a similar purpose in lawns. If you have leaves left over after dressing your garden beds, run over them with a mower and they become free fertilizer for your lawn. In addition to giving back nutrients, when leaves break down, they store carbon. That means they reduce greenhouse gases and helps fight climate change.

Just as importantly, leaf litter is needed for the survival of many beneficial insects. The stable, moist environment is where insects can lay eggs, larvae can develop, and they can be protected from predators. Fireflies are a good example of why leaf litter and decomposing leaves are critical. The decline in the number of fireflies is directly related to a lack of leaf litter. Another one that needs leaf litter is the luna moth caterpillar. It builds its cocoons in fallen leaves to survive through winter. Insects that burrow to be protected from the cold and start new colonies, like queen bumble bees, rely on the leaves for extra warmth. So, allow places for leaves to gather and stay for the winter until temperatures are consistently above 50 degrees F. That will allow time for all the winter residents of the litter to leave.

The leaves help other wildlife, too. Birds and other animals forage in the leaves for insects and seeds. Toads, some shrews and chipmunks count on fallen leaves for camouflage to hide from predators. Critters like some birds, squirrels, and chipmunks use leaves to build nests. Some frogs and turtles also burrow under leaves for protection from the cold and to hide from predators.

Those leaves are falling for you. They offer free mulch, fertilizer, clay soil amendment, protection and food for pollinators and other wildlife, and help decrease greenhouse gases. Talk about gifts from above! Who knew leaves were so precious?

Resources

“Why Leave the Leaves and How to Do it,” <https://njaes.rutgers.edu/FS1369/>

“Don’t Bag Your Fall Leaves – Use Them,” <https://extension.illinois.edu/blogs/know-how-know-more/2025-10-27-dont-bag-your-fall-leaves-use-them>

For more information about gardening, visit UTHORT’s YouTube site for helpful videos: <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCjS3d1IklH1OZ1Z2qPvhgfQ>

Or Washington County’s YouTube site: <https://www.youtube.com/@utextensionwashingtoncounty>

How do I ask a question?

If you have questions for the Master Gardeners, submit them to us on our website at www.netmga.net. Click the link at the top of the page, “ASK A MASTER GARDENER” to send in your question. Questions that are not answered in this column will receive a response from a Master Gardener to the contact information you provide.

The Master Gardener Program is offered by the University of Tennessee Extension. The purpose of the Master Gardener program is to train people as horticultural-educated volunteers. These volunteers work in partnership with the local Extension office in their counties to expand educational outreach, providing home gardeners with researched-based information.