

Danny L. Cain  
Walker County Extension Office  
1501 North Airport Road  
Jasper, AL 35504  
205-221-3392  
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The colder weather experienced the past couple days here around Walker County leaves no doubt that fall and winter are rapidly approaching. This is always the time of year when we begin to wonder or even dread what we are going to do with all those leaves that will soon be dropping from the trees around our yards and landscapes.

Leaves tend to be one of those things in our landscape that we “love and hate” depending on the time of the year. In the hot summer, they are our best friend. In the late fall, they become our enemy. By figuring out that they can also be our friend after they fall, one of life’s yearly challenges can be very beneficial to us.

The chore of raking leaves, while not being much fun, used to be a part of what we did each fall. We would rake them, bag them and send them off to the landfill. Even worse, many people still rake and burn fall leaves which not only wastes the valuable organic matter and nutrients in the leaves but also creates a fire hazard given the dryer than normal weather we experienced during this summer and early fall.

There are several alternatives for leaf disposal. The first one that comes to mind is composting. It is encouraging to me that so many people have called our office for information on home composting. Composting is a great way to turn all those fall leaves into a very useful and valuable soil amendment.

Leaves alone are difficult to decompose; however, by mixing them with a few grass clippings, composted manure, or generous amounts of fertilizer, the leaves can be reduced to nature’s “black gold” for your gardening needs. If you have the space and time, stock piled leaves will rot on their own. If you use this method, have patience, as the breakdown takes quite awhile. Do keep in mind that the smaller the leaf material the quicker it will compost. Shredding leaves can speed the process quite a bit.

Another option for leaf disposal is to use the leaves as mulching material. Instead of buying bag after bag of mulch, let Mother Nature help you save some money.

The best way to collect leaves is by using the lawn mower bagging attachment. Collecting the leaves with the mower helps to shred and greatly reduce the bulk. Once collected, the leaves can be spread around the bases of young trees or shrubs or used to cover bare soil areas in the flower garden. The leaf layer will provide additional organic matter as they decompose and help conserve moisture and control weed growth. Leaves do break down quickly as a mulch layer, which means you will need to add material a little more often as compared to bark mulch.

Shredded leaves can also be stock piled over the winter and used the following spring. You can fill a couple of large compost bins with the shredded leaves and mulch your vegetable garden the following spring. At the end of the season you can simply till them in for added organic matter.

Lastly the leaves can be incorporated into the garden this fall. Spread a couple of inches (don't get carried away, too much can create problems) over the garden and work them into the soil. Mother Nature will compost them over the winter. Have you ever noticed how dark and rich looking the soil is in most of our forests? I have talked to several gardeners who always tell me they are going to get some "woods dirt" to incorporate into their garden or flower beds. The main reason forest soil looks that way is because of all the organic material from the dropping leaves and debris from the trees. Incorporating fall leaves into your garden can help build up your garden's soil in the same way.

As you can see there are many ways of disposing of your fall "headache". The challenge is to find the method that works for you.