

Recycling Leaves

According to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, Americans generate about 243 million tons of municipal trash each year. They recycle and compost 82 million tons of this material. On average, a single person will recycle and compost only 1.46 pounds of his or her total daily trash generation of 4.34 pounds. Roughly 75 percent of all municipal waste is material that could be recycled. (EPA report, EPA-530-F-010-012, December 2010, www.epa.gov/wastes)

You can have an impact on decreasing the volume of trash in our landfills and add a benefit to your yard at the same time. Recycle leaves and other yard waste for use as mulch or compost them for use as a soil amendment.

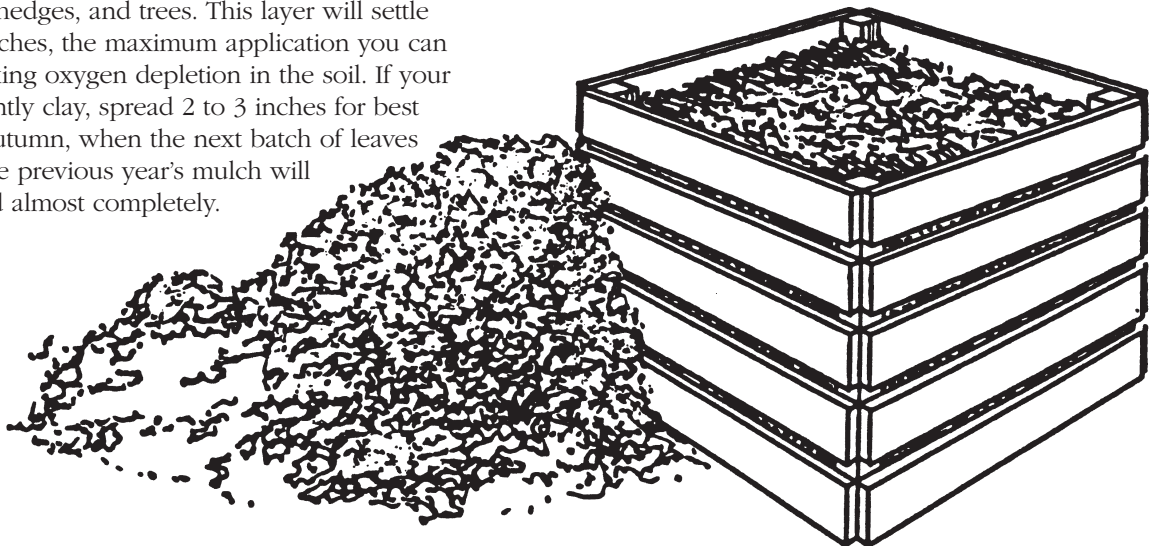
Leaves make an excellent mulch for outdoor plants and shrubs. Whole leaves may be used for mulch, but you can reduce their volume (to as much as one-tenth the size) by shredding or chopping them. Shredded leaves not only take up less space, they also make a more uniform mulch. Mulch conserves water, suppresses weeds, and moderates fluctuating soil temperatures that can disturb roots.

If your soil drains well (is sandy or loamy), spread up to 5 inches of chopped leaves on all garden beds and under all shrubs, hedges, and trees. This layer will settle down to 3 or 4 inches, the maximum application you can make without risking oxygen depletion in the soil. If your soil is predominantly clay, spread 2 to 3 inches for best results. By next autumn, when the next batch of leaves is about to fall, the previous year's mulch will have decomposed almost completely.

Leaves can also be turned into compost. Compost is the product of the aerobic (in the presence of oxygen) biological decomposition of organic waste material under controlled conditions. Composting at home saves transportation and disposal costs and provides an environmentally sound way to manage yard waste. Composting offers you an opportunity to contribute to and benefit from part of the solid-waste solution.

If you have a compost bin, fill it in the fall and keep any remaining leaves in a holding bin or in plastic bags stored near the bin. As leaves settle in the bin, add another bag or two of the remaining leaves. The settling process will go faster if some microorganisms are added to the leaves. Mix a few shovelfuls of soil or finished compost into the pile at the beginning of the process. A cup of a nitrogen fertilizer added to the pile will then encourage microorganism reproduction and growth. By spring, all leaves should be in the bin. By early fall, they will have decomposed enough to be spread around the landscape as winter mulch or to be tilled into garden soil to improve the soil for growing plants next spring.

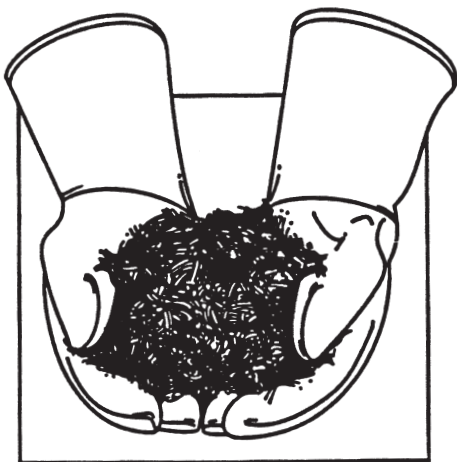
If you don't have a bin, you can create a compost heap, which is simply a free-standing pile of leaves. A good, workable size for a compost heap is about 3 feet wide and 3 feet high. The length can vary according to the amount of leaves used.



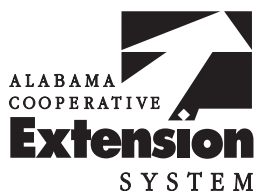
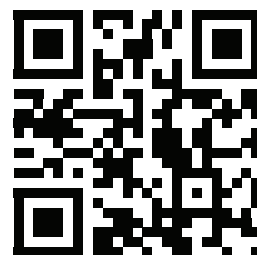
A good location is helpful for a successful compost pile. The bin or pile needs good drainage, and water should be readily available. The compost pile also should not be located against wooden buildings or trees, since wood in contact with compost may decay.

If you notice strong odors from your compost pile, you probably need to turn it. Odors associated with composting are generally due to insufficient oxygen or too much water in the pile. After the composting process is complete, unpleasant odors are no longer generated.

A compost pile that does not need turning is one made up of nothing but leaves. It will slowly decompose in about 2 years. However, if you want to speed up the process, you can turn the pile monthly. This brings the most decomposed material at the bottom to the top and shifts the least decomposed material to the hot bottom of the pile. Make sure you add some water each time you turn the pile. The compost is ready to use when it is dark and crumbly like rich soil.



Use this quick reference to visit the Extension online store to find other recycling, sustainability, and related publications. Scan the symbol below using the code-reading app on a smart-phone or tablet equipped with a camera.



ANR-0692

Kerry Smith, *Extension Administrator, Outreach Program, Horticulture*; **David Williams**, *former Extension Horticulturist*; **James O. Donald**, *Extension Agricultural Engineer, Professor, Interim Director, Nptc, Biosystems Engineering*; and **William D. Goff**, *Extension Horticulturist, Nun Bond Professor, Horticulture*, all with Auburn University; and **Tony A. Glover**, *County Extension Coordinator, Cullman County*.

Funding sources were the Alabama Department of Economic and Community Affairs, Science, Technology, and Energy Division; the Alabama Department of Environmental Management, Land Division, Solid Waste Branch; and the U.S. Department of Energy (DOE) Grant No. DE-FG-44-77CS60208. However, any opinions, findings, conclusions, or recommendations expressed herein are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of DOE.

For more information, call your county Extension office. Look in your telephone directory under your county's name to find the number.

Published by the Alabama Cooperative Extension System (Alabama A&M University and Auburn University), an equal opportunity educator and employer.

12M, Revised Oct 2011, ANR-0692