



How to Leave the Leaves

Leaves and other organic matter, like logs and dried stems, play an important role in your garden. You can make a huge difference for wildlife and the environment with a few simple fall gardening practices.

The fallen leaf layer isn't just a happy reminder of autumn, it's also a vitally important habitat element for [many wildlife species](#) throughout the year. Many beloved insect species like butterflies, moths, and fireflies use this layer as a safe spot to wait out the winter, and others forage in and even eat the decomposing leaves. Songbirds, small mammals, amphibians and reptiles all rely on the leaf layer too. Even plants and soil microbes benefit from the decaying leaves that provide a natural fertilizer!

One of the best things you can do for wildlife, the environment, and even your wallet is to intentionally use the fallen leaves and other organic matter in your garden.

These tips will help you learn how!

Did you Know?

Leaves and other organic yard debris make up over 7.2% of the nation's solid waste. That's over 10.5 million tons of organic matter that could otherwise be used as fertilizing wildlife habitat!

Tips & Info

Where and How to Leave the Leaves

- 1. Avoid smothering your lawn or covering pathways.** If you have sidewalks, driveways, or turfgrass lawn, be sure to rake the leaves from these areas and use them elsewhere in your garden (see other options below).

A light scattering of leaves is fine, but allowing a thick layer of leaves to blanket the turfgrass will smother lawn and keeping leaves on sidewalks and driveways can present hazards while also making your gardening choice look messy rather than intentional. Avoid hazards and neighbor complaints by moving the leaves to more beneficial areas of the garden!

- 2. Add to garden beds for extra benefits to the soil.** Placing a layer of fallen leaves as mulch in your garden beds not only benefits overwintering wildlife, but it can also help suppress weeds and return important nutrients to the soil for your garden plants!
- 3. Place leaves under native trees to provide prime habitat for wildlife.** Many native trees are host plants for caterpillars who will be looking for a leaf layer in which to overwinter. Mammals and birds that enjoy the shelter of the tree will also benefit from a leaf layer where they can forage.
- 4. Pile up extra leaves and turn them into leaf mulch.** If you've already added leaves to your garden beds and under trees and still have more, you can pile them up in a corner of your garden. This pile will break down into *leaf mulch*, an incredible compost for your garden that can be used in the coming seasons!
- 5. Go beyond leaves by leaving the logs and stems too!** Many insects, like native bees, overwinter inside of hollow dried flower stems or in decaying logs and branches. Allow the dried, brown stems of your plants to remain through the winter and only cut them down to 18-24 inches tall in late spring.

- 6. Use a rake (not a leaf blower).** When moving the leaves in your garden, opt for a rake which avoids the pollution and noise that a leaf blower creates.
- 7. Make your leaf layer 3-5 inches thick.** When placing leaves in your garden beds and under trees, aim to mimic the depth of the naturally occurring leaf layer to provide optimum benefit for wildlife without making it too deep. This layer will naturally compress down and decompose over time.
- 8. Keep them from blowing away.** You can water your leaf layer to better weigh the leaves down and keep them from blowing away from the areas you have intentionally placed them.

What happens to yard waste?

About 30% of yard waste collected goes straight to the landfill. Even for the roughly 60% that does get composted, this still presents issues for wildlife who depended on that leaf layer to overwinter, and many critters like firefly larva and caterpillars can actually get carted away in the yard waste bags themselves!

Sources: "Yard Trimmings: Material-Specific Data | US EPA." US EPA, 22 Nov. 2023, www.epa.gov/facts-and-figures-about-materials-waste-and-recycling/yard-trimmings-material-specific-data.



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