



Composting Leaves
by Sue McDavid
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It is that time of year again when leaves are falling and the sound of leaf blowers seems never-ending. There is a time and place for blowing leaves, but think about this: Leaves can become "garden gold" with a little bit of effort and time. Properly used as mulch or compost, leaves can provide outstanding organic matter to add nutrients and enrich the soil. So, stop blowing or bagging those leaves -- your neighbors will thank you for decreasing all that noise from leaf blowers and landfills won't get so plugged with green waste.

To use leaves effectively as mulch and compost, they must be gathered from gardens or lawns so there is some control over where they are used. Leaving a thick layer of leaves on a lawn or garden bed can create conditions that lead to rotting of the grass or perennials below, so start raking the leaves into a pile. Once they are piled up, there is a choice between using them undecomposed as mulch, or composting them. Regardless of how they are going to be used, the first step is to chop or shred the leaves. This will save space if they will be placed in a bin, it will minimize the leaves from blowing around and matting if placed in the garden and will hasten their eventual decomposition into composted organic matter.

If a shredder is not available, a lawn mower can be used to shred the leaves. Another method is to place the leaves into a large container (such as a metal garbage can) and use a weed whacker to shred them. Don't forget to use eye protection when doing this. Once the leaves are shredded, they can be placed in the garden as mulch immediately. Another method is to compost the leaves, either alone or with other organic matter. A simple, but longest, process is to place the shredded leaves in a wire bin, leave them there for a year or two, turning them occasionally, and a really nice end product called leaf mold will occur. Leaf mold is a fungus-rich compost that can retain three to five times its weight in water. The only disadvantage to using leaves alone for composting is that a tremendous amount of leaves are required to produce any quantity of compost.

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Leaves can be used more effectively as a component in a compost pile that contains a variety of organic matter. A well-balanced compost pile contains materials rich in nitrogen and others rich in carbon; leaves can provide the carbon component. Other good carbon components include straw, non-glossy paper, wood and bark chips. Good nitrogen materials include grass and plant clippings, fruit and vegetable scraps, eggshells and coffee grounds. Use shredded leaves and other carbon materials to layer between the nitrogen materials in a bin. Turn the pile occasionally to aerate it and make sure that it is moist, but not soggy. It is not necessary to add commercial compost starters or fertilizer to a compost pile to start it. The amount of time it will take to produce compost depends upon its size, composition and conditions, but the end result -- garden gold -- will be worth your time and effort!

Want to learn more about creating your own garden gold? Come to this Saturday's free Master Gardener class, Composting. Class is from 9:00 a.m. to noon at the Sherwood Demonstration Garden, 6699 Campus Drive in Placerville. Slow and fast compost methods, leaf composting, worms, and many other techniques to create your own backyard compost will be shown.

UCCE Master Gardeners of El Dorado County are available to answer home gardening questions Tuesday through Friday, 9:00 a.m. to noon, by calling (530) 621-5512. Walk-ins are welcome at our office, located at 311 Fair Lane in Placerville. For more information about our public education classes and activities, go to our UCCE Master Gardeners of El Dorado County website at <http://mgeldorado.ucanr.edu>. Sign up to receive our online notices and e-newsletter at <http://ucanr.edu/mastergardener-e-news>. You can also find us on Facebook.