

October 3, 2018



Leave Your Leaves Alone!
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Gardeners should take a lesson from Mother Nature. Hike thru the woods, and you will see pathways covered with decomposing leaves. This natural material discourages weeds, holds water, provides plant insulation in hot & cold weather, and encourages beneficial organisms and nutrients. A Gardeners Delight!

Let's start at the beginning. Keep in mind that **mulch** is material that goes on top of the soil. **Compost** is organic material that is mixed into the soil. Fall leaves can be the main ingredient in both mulch and compost.

Where do you get the leaves? If you have lots of trees on your property, you are set. Some leaves are better than others. Maple, Birch, Ash, Beech, and fruit tree leaves are great to use as mulch or compost. Avoid using Black Walnut and Eucalyptus leaves in your leaf mulch. These leaves contain some compounds that can be harmful to other plants. Oak leaves should be composted in moderation as they tend to be more acidic. Too many in a compost pile can result in a compost that is not ideal for veggie gardens. Rule of thumb, Oak leaves should make up only 10-20% of total compost pile, with "green" items making up the rest.

If you don't have a lot of trees, you might drive around your neighborhood. Some Master Gardeners have been known to ask neighbors for their leaves! They may already be bagged up, just ask the homeowner if you can take them.

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Here are three ways to process your leaves for lawn and garden.

- 1) Leaf Mulch
- 2) Leaf Mold
- 3) Leaf Compost

Leaf Mulch is your easiest and quickest way to process leaves. The most important step for good mulch would be for you to shred your leaves. This helps the leaves decompose quicker, causing calcium, magnesium, phosphorus, and potassium to leach into the soil below. It enriches the soil and protects plant root systems. Shredding leaves can be easy with a lawnmower. By moving the mower over leaves, you can get the job done. An inch of shredded leaves will provide nutrients to your lawn over the winter. Excess chopped leaves can be used on flower beds or in the garden for overwintering. Other methods for shredding leaves include using a string trimmer in a metal garbage can. Fill the can with leaves and safely crank up the trimmer. Some leaf blowers have a vacuum/shred feature. There are also commercial leaf shredders which can be purchased or rented.

The Leaf Mold process is simple but does require time, and a place to store those leaves for 1-3 years. During that time, the (brown) leaves will slowly decompose with high levels of carbon, without the addition of a source of nitrogen from (green) garden waste.

Leaf Compost is made by adding shredded leaves (brown) to a mixture of high nitrogen (green) ingredients, such as grass clippings and kitchen scraps. Do not use meat or dairy products! Compost makes the most effective use of the limited nutrient content of fall leaves. It will take some time, and energy to manage a compost pile, but well worth the effort. A helpful free publication can be found at mgeldorado.ucanr.edu > classes & workshops > presentations & handouts > Composting > [backyard composting basics \(2017\)](#). The site is a wonderful resource for exploring a wealth of information for the home gardener here in El Dorado County.

In summary, there are many uses for your fall leaves. Spread a blanket of mulch as winter insulation on garden beds. Use a layer of packed leaves on dormant perennials in containers. Leaf mulch provides habitat for wildlife. In heavily wooded properties, let the leaves lie where they fall. Gardeners have used fall leaves as paths thru the woods by “paving” leaves into winding paths, and then compacting the leaves for a rustic trail.

This year, don't blow those fall leaves away! Leave your leaves alone, and your lawn and garden will be very happy come spring!!

Coming on Wednesday, October 10 will be a joint Master Gardener-Master Food Preserver class on “Grapes from Garden to Table” at the Cameron Park Community Center, 2502 Country Club Drive, Cameron Park. This free class will be 9:00 a.m. to noon and cover many aspects of successfully growing grapes in our area, and then how to make some delicious recipes!

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](tel:5306215512). Walk-ins are welcome at our office, located at 311 Fair Lane in Placerville. Visit us at the Sherwood

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Demonstration Garden, located at 6699 Campus Drive in Placerville, behind Folsom Lake College – El Dorado Center. The garden is open through October on Fridays and Saturdays, 9:00 a.m. to noon.

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/master_gardener_e-news. You can also find us on Facebook.