

To Leave or Not To Leave: That is the Question!

Fallen tree leaves that is! A few weeks ago, my hubby and I were sitting in the swing on our deck enjoying a warm, fall afternoon. The sun was glinting through the golden leaves of the Silver Maples and every once in awhile, as a breeze came through, a few leaves would flutter down to the deck and garden below. Aahh, I mused to my dear, "it's like watching golden snowflakes fall." His reply, "Yeah, but they don't melt!" So much for musing!!!! And back to reality.

In the next few months our deciduous trees and shrubs will not only be changing colors, but will also be completely devoid of their leaves. What to do with all those leaves?

There are several options for the gardener to consider: 1. Leave the leaves where they fall. 2. Rake the leaves and compost them. 3. Rake the leaves, shred them and use the shredded material as mulch for the areas from where you raked the leaves. 4. Rake the leaves and burn them, or 5. Take them to the dump. For me, the only options are the first three. Because the leaves from my deciduous trees and shrubs are valuable assets to my garden, I don't ever think of doing the last two options.

At this time of the year most of us head outside to 'tidy up' our gardens. That means raking leaves, doing some pruning and clearing out any extra debris that might be in the garden beds. But I would like you to think about the leaves and debris as food for your garden. If you simply leave the leaves where they fall in your planting beds to form natural mulch, you can provide your plants with a protective blanket in winter, conserve water year-round, and enrich your soil as the plant material decomposes. If you are lucky to have an overabundance of leaves in your yard, composting is a sensible solution to disposing of them. Or, if you are fortunate to have a chipper/shredder, you can turn the leaves and prunings into wonderful mulch.

Don't have a chipper/shredder? Then another solution is to place the leaves in a 30 gallon garbage can and use a weed-eater as a giant mixer! Works like a charm!! In a recent article in the National Wildlife publication, Michael Goatley, Jr., an agricultural extension turf grass specialist based at Virginia Tech University, points to recent studies that show you can even keep the fallen leaves on your lawn, as long as you pass over them once or twice with a rotary mower to chop them into small pieces.

As I stated above, in my garden I use a combination of methods for my fallen leaves. At the front of the house, the two very mature Silver Maples drop more leaves than I want in the garden bed under them. If I were to leave them, they would smother several ground-hugging plants. So these leaves are removed and shredded and then put back in that same bed, being careful to cover the soil and not the plants. In other beds around the yard, the leaves are allowed to stay where they fall, since these beds contain mostly shrubs and pruned-backed perennials that enjoy a blanket of leaves during the winter. And lastly, the leaves that fall on the deck that surrounds our home are collected (by my dear hubby who wishes they would 'melt') and shredded and either used throughout the gardens or put in the compost pile. Since I'm fortunate to have a chipper/shredder, all my prunings and other garden debris are chipped or shredded and added to the garden as mulch, with the overflow also going into the compost pile. The

compost made from the leaves and prunings will be added to the garden beds in the spring and, because of its richness, I rarely have to use any type of fertilizer. The leaf mulch also keeps the earthworms busy and I'm happy for the castings they leave behind...another reason fertilizer is not needed.

An additional benefit of leaving the leaves, or shredding them and putting them back in the garden, is that small critters—like toads, lizards, frogs and native bees—will have a cozy spot to spend the winter. We even keep a couple of small brush piles on the property for the quail to nest in; it keeps them safe from the wandering cats in our area.

According to the Environmental Protection Agency, landscape debris comprises more than 13 percent by weight of all solid waste generated in the United States...or an astonishing 32 million tons a year! This material in landfills, when decomposing and lacking sufficient oxygen, creates methane gas. A powerful greenhouse gas, methane is 23 times more effective at trapping heat in the atmosphere than carbon dioxide. Not surprisingly, solid waste landfills are the single largest man-made source of methane in the United States. Something to think about while you're on the way to the dump with those leaves!

If you absolutely cannot keep leaves and prunings in your own yard and garden, instead of taking them to the dump, consider taking them to the ERF (Earth Resources Facility) on Camage Avenue in Sonora where they will be turned into mulch which is available for purchase. That's a win-win situation for you, area gardens and the environment!

Carolee James is probably chipping and shredding as you read this.