



# Growing Guru



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## LEAVE THE LEAVES

Every fall we are thrilled to see reds, yellows, and oranges, as deciduous leaves prepare for their own fall from their parent tree. But not long after, breezes help them abscise from their branch, and they flutter to the ground. In woods and forests these leaves decay, and we hardly notice them on the ground by spring. However, around our homes, it is often a different story, and a common fall activity is to gather up and remove this leaf litter. Yes, ecologists really do call it leaf litter.



Have you ever thought of these reasons why it would be good to leave the leaves at your home instead?

- free fertilizer for your lawn, garden beds, and trees, especially if you mow over the leaves first
- excellent mulch for keeping out weed species, for retaining moisture, and for improving soil
- winter habitat and shelter for overwintering pollinators and other food sources for larger animals
- reducing the amount of gas burning used to blow leaves in a pile and cart them away in a truck

Leaving leaves whole and tucked under shrubs and trees and on garden beds is the best practice. But when you have many leaves on the lawn, as shown above in my neighbor's backyard, breaking up the leaves with a mover or mulcher, reduces their volume and speeds up decay, especially for oak leaves. These leaves are now in my compost bin for use next year in the bottom of plant sale pots, and in my vegetable and flower gardens in spring, where the decaying leaves will serve as mulch and enhancements to the soil.

This [joe gardener® podcast](#) explains why leaves change color and shed, and why they make great mulch. The [Xerces Society for Invertebrate Conservation](#) details the importance of leaves for insects and other invertebrates and provides links to other resources. In 2011 in New York, a group of Master Gardeners started the [Leave Leaves Alone](#) initiative to promote leaf mulching and other ways to manage leaves. The [Wild Seed Project](#) in Maine illustrates why we should rethink garden "clean up."