

News

Leaf It Be

The argument fallen leaves are a healthy, ecologically important part of nature and not a blight on the neighborhood

By Elizabeth Keyser

Comments (2) Thursday, October 29, 2009

The yearly attack on leaves has begun. Landscaping crews descend upon yards and fields with their weapons: leaf blowers, vacuum trucks and the odd quaint rake. Towns send garbage trucks rumbly through the streets to remove brown leaf bags piled high or vacuum box trucks to suck up "the waste."



But wait – these are the leaves whose brilliant colors we praise as a glory of the Northeast. For millions of years, they have dropped from the trees every fall. They are an important part of the ecosystem, a natural fertilizer. When did they become our enemy?

A quiet revolution is brewing. Across the state, homeowners, landscapers and municipal employees are refining methods of dealing with fall leaves.

"Leaves are what the ecosystem of this area wants for fertility," says Bill Duesing, executive director of the Northeast Organic Farmers Association. Leaves hold water and neutralize acid. As they break down, they slowly release nutrients. Their compost is rich in microorganisms that enhance the soil.

"It's like a sickness in our society, the idea that we should remove the leaves," says Duesing. He recommends that "as much as possible," homeowners let them be, especially around trees and shrubs. Leaves removed from hard surfaces, decks, patios and paths ideally should be used for compost on your own property. And if you think you don't have enough room, remember that a pile of leaves will naturally reduce to a small fraction of the volume within weeks.

But, my lawn!, you cry. Those leaves are going to kill my perfect green lawn! Duesing says there's an easy solution, one that's better for the environment and better for your lawn: Mow them. By spring, the chopped leaves will have broken down, nourishing the soil and making the lawn greener.

Plus, removing all these leaves isn't doing the environment much good. Rakes and blowers remove the most valuable part of the soil, the humus. Making it worse, many homeowners and municipalities replace the lost nutrients with synthetic petroleum-based chemicals that instantly release high levels of phosphorus and nitrogen. The run-off pollutes water tables and Long Island Sound.

Since the 1990s, state law has stated leaves cannot be dumped in landfills or burned in incinerators. "We've been composting for 20 years and it's going pretty well," says the DEP's K.C. Anderson, who works with towns to create leaf recycling programs.

Duesing points to a study at Purdue University in which researchers mowed two tons of leaves per acre into the turf each year for five years. "They did not see an increase of weeds or disease," he says. "Microbial activity increased significantly." In other words, it was good for

Find it Here:

keyword: [input field]
search type: [dropdown: AND (all keywords)] search in: [dropdown: Articles] [Search button]

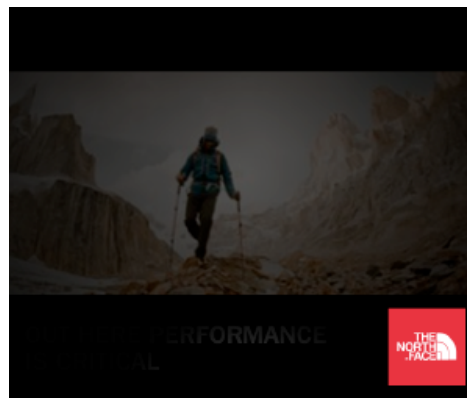
<< Previous | Next >>

SHARE [social media icons]

Print

Email

RSS feed



Leaf It Be

The argument fallen leaves are a healthy, ecologically important part of nature and not a blight on the neighborhood

By Elizabeth Keyser 10/29/2009

The Last Round

By Erin Lynch 10/29/2009

Curator Wanted

By William Squier 10/29/2009

Who'd Want to Be Mayor?

Four contenders compete to lead the troubled Town of Stratford

By Erin Holroyd 10/29/2009

The Right to Remain Loud

The government doesn't grant you the right to free speech. It only protects it.

By Phil Maymin 10/29/2009

We Built These Cities

the grass.

Judy Prill, of the Connecticut DEP's Office of Pollution Prevention, says the same thing: "Chopping them with a lawn mower is the easiest."

Got a lot of leaves and little lawn? "If a lot of leaves are coming down, mow frequently to keep them from matting and suffocating grass," says Branford Parks and Recreation Director Alex Palluzzi Jr., who designed an award-winning compost program for the town.

Although Branford has been composting for a decade, in the last several years Palluzzi has worked with the non-profit Watershed Partnership and Sherwood Landscapes to refine the composting method. The town is now applying the rich, coffee-grain-like compost in thin layers on the town's athletic fields in lieu of commercial fertilizer. "It's gorgeous," says Palluzzi, "like you'd want in your backyard." Municipalities from Florida to Rhode Island have contacted him for information about Branford's composting program.

"We've saved the taxpayers thousands of dollars in just a couple years," says Palluzzi. Commercial fertilizers cost \$20 to \$25 a yard, he said. "We're making [the compost] for under \$4 a yard."

The towns of Wethersfield and New Canaan also have successful town-based leaf composting programs. New Canaan spreads the compost on athletic fields and offers it free to residents. "[The residents] call it 'black gold,'" says Mose Zachary, the town's Highway Superintendent of Roads.

These are good developments for the environment, but think about all the fuel and emissions from the trucks and machinery that pick up those leaves and haul them to composting sites, and then all the cars and trucks that are used to distribute the compost.

For example, GreenCycle, a private company, processes all the yard waste collected by Fairfield's Department of Public Works. The company hauls the leaves to Ellington, over 77 miles away, to compost them and then sell screened compost for \$35 a yard to landscapers and garden centers. Though GreenCycle has a facility at the Fairfield Transfer Station, "there's not enough room to compost," explains Chris Field of GreenCycle.

Kevin Fox, Fairfield's Parks Superintendent, says he'd like to take steps to better utilize the fall leaves, but must deal with the constraints of town budgets and manpower. "My workforce is down," Fox says. "I lost two guys to early retirement and another guy was laid off. I need to work around the weather. And when the leaves come down, they come down." He says 60 to 70 percent of the leaves fall within a week and a half. "I agree with the idea of organics. Study after study has proven the chopped leaves are good for the grass." Fox adds that his father has been mowing the leaves on his property since the 1960s.

Fairfield also contracts with garbage companies to pick up the bags of leaves residents place on their curbs. Those leaves are delivered to Snow's Farm in Easton, which sells the compost for \$21 a cubic yard. The town of Fairfield spends over \$90,000 a year to have these bags of leaves picked up for four weeks each Autumn. Mike Zembruski, Director of Solid Waste and Recycling, breaks this down to a cost of about \$1.11 per household, an excellent deal for residents, he says. Zembruski believes Fairfield's leaf and brush recycling program is a success.

Removing leaves has become what UConn social psychology professor Colin Leach describes as a "descriptive norm." Our neighbor's leafless lawns influence us to "conform to the majority," he says. "We may believe that a good person keeps their lawn tidy and part of this is raking leaves in the autumn."

Duesing thinks it would be fine if we let our properties be a little messy.

"Nature's not neat," he says, "but nature is going to win."

Comments (2)

▼ Post a Comment

This is one of the best articles I've seen to inform people of the benefits of USING fallen leaves, instead

GeoCities shut down last week, vaporizing all those cheesy '90s Web sites. Does that even really matter?

By Brianna Snyder
10/29/2009

A New Day?

Critics hope a new head of the state's Elections Enforcement Commission will be tougher on corrupt politicians

by Gregory B. Hladky
10/29/2009

Give it back Barack

Rather than acknowledge the honor, the media immediately went negative.

By Alan Bisbort
10/15/2009



of blowing them away. To learn about health problems created and/or aggravated by the use of leaf blowers, go to www.zapla.org, a public service website regarding aspects of the ten-year old Los Angeles City ban on gas blowers within 500 feet of a residence. And see YouTube's Leaf Blower Pollution video.

Posted by Chair Zero Air Pollution Education Committee on 10.27.09 at 10.33

I second that comment. Excellent article.

I have been trying for a couple of years to get my city (Takoma Park, Md.) to ban gas-powered leaf blowers, which are significant contributors to ozone pollution. Like all gas-powered lawn and garden eqpt, the blowers emit disproportionately high levels of nitrogen oxides and Volatile Organic Compounds, which react with sunlight to produce ozone.

Posted by Steve Davies on 10.29.09 at 16.06

Post a Comment

Name*:

Email*:

URL:

Comment:

All comments must adhere to our [Terms & Conditions of Use](#).