

Turf experts explain why mulching leaves is a better solution than disposal

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Credit: Pexels

October is peak season for admiring fall foliage and soon those leaves will begin to fall, if they haven't already done so. Before you start to clean them up, Virginia Tech turf experts suggest that you try a different

approach instead of bagging and tossing.

"If you collect leaves, it's ideal to compost them rather than disposing of them in the [landfills](#)," says Virginia Tech turfgrass expert Mike Goatley. "The biggest concerns with landfills is that the leaves occupy space that would be much better served for typical landfill debris, instead of [organic waste](#) that can be used in a proactive way for the lawn, landscape, garden, and/or flower beds."

"Research has shown that plastic bags filled with leaves can last for years in the landfill." Goatley says it's important to note that most municipalities will not accept leaves collected in non-biodegradable bags (i.e., [plastic bags](#)) in their community leaf-collection programs.

Mulching leaves in yards, instead of removing them, actually benefits lawns and gardens, according to experts.

"Using a mulching mower to not only mow but to mulch leaves will help keep your lawn properly trimmed, but also accelerate the rate of leaf decomposition into beneficial soil organic matter," says Dan Sandor, who is also an expert in turfgrass science at Virginia Tech. "While the [tree leaves](#) do not have a lot of nutritional value, chopping them up and returning them to the soil is a great way to increase soil organic matter levels." Some research has even shown that leaves from specific tree species may provide some control of broadleaf-weeds and/or may provide nitrogen-fertilizer benefits.

According to Sandor, the best time to mulch leaves is when they are slightly moist because they are easier to shred. "It's important to wear [eye protection](#) during this process and make sure you have removed all other debris that might be a hazard. Remember, you are using a mower to mulch leaves, not grind stumps."

You also want to be sure not to let your yard get too many leaves on it. "A heavy leaf cover can significantly reduce the photosynthetic activity of the turfgrasses in your [lawn](#), restricting them from the beneficial sunlight that are required for optimal growth and development," explains Goatley. "If this is the case, you'll need to rake some of them and consider adding those to your compost pile, otherwise you will need to run the mulching mower over the leaves several times so they can be more-readily broken down into soil [organic matter](#)."

Provided by Virginia Tech

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