

Urban Leaves

Leaves are truly one of the urban gardener's greatest resources. According to *The Rodale Book of Composting*: "...the leaves of most trees contain twice the mineral content of manure." This is because the extensive root system of trees allows them to draw minerals from deep in the soil. They are also high in fibre which "aids in improving the aeration and crumb structure of most soils." In the Greater Victoria Area, leaves, along with other yard and garden waste, cannot be put out with the garbage, and in many municipalities leaf burning is prohibited. However, leaves have many uses for the home gardener and when used properly can greatly improve a garden's soil. Leaves can be used for composting, mulch, lasagna gardening/sheet mulching, potting soil, soil building, worm bedding, and chicken coop bedding. In most cities leaves are plentiful in the autumn and can easily be collected from yards, parks, and streets.

Collection and storage of urban leaves

Collection

Autumn is the best time for urban gardeners to stock up on valuable leaves. Leaves can be easily collected and stored, to ensure gardeners have a supply that will last them the full year.

Leaves are best collected from yards and parks, where they are less likely to contain contaminants such as litter, oils, or other vehicle fluids. Leaves can also be collected from streets, but these leaves should be composted to break down potential liquid contaminants. When collecting leaves, you can use a wheelbarrow, a tarp, bike trailer, garbage pail, or vehicle.



Storage

When storing the leaves, try to compact them so they take up less space. Wet leaves can be difficult to work with; spreading them out and fluffing them up to allow them to dry makes them more user friendly. Leaves can be stored in strong plastic garbage bags or bins. Larger amounts of leaves can be stored in a hoop bin (see picture).

This simple hoop bin is made with 1/2" (1.2cm) hardware cloth held together by 2 1x4 pieces of cedar and four wing nuts. It has a simple plywood lid. A four foot (1.2m) diameter bin will hold almost one cubic yard (.76 cubic meters) of leaves. Most materials can be purchased at your local hardware store. S



What to do with leaves

In Compost

Composting is a great way of utilizing the nutrients and qualities of leaves. Some common leaves found here in the CRD are: maple, alder, oak, birch, poplar, ornamental cherry, chestnut, and those from fruit trees.



Composting with leaves is easy and quick. Leaves that have turned brown and fallen to the ground have lost most of their nitrogen and should be mixed with a high nitrogen material like fresh manure, grass clippings, or food scraps to make a balanced compost. Shredding the leaves will accelerate their decomposition. This can be done with a leaf shredder or a common rotary lawn mower.

To compost leaves, use 50-70% (by volume) leaves and 30-50% of high nitrogen materials. If you are hot composting the leaves, make sure your compost pile is at least one cubic meter (3 cubic feet) in order to break them down more quickly. If you are composting in a backyard bin, be sure to mix the leaves thoroughly with food scraps and other materials in the bin.

See Fact Sheet #1 (Back Yard Composting) and #4 (Hot Composting) for more detailed information on how to effectively compost your leaves and other materials.

Leaf Mold

For the busy gardener, leaf mold can be a very handy resource. By simply keeping leaves in a plastic bag, a covered pile, or a hoop bin, they will slowly break down over the course of a year or two, resulting in leaf mold.



One of leaf mold's best qualities is its ability to hold water. According to *The Rodale Book of Composting*: "Leaf mold's ability to retain moisture is amazing... leaf mold can retain 300 to 500 percent of its weight (in water)." Compare that to "rich topsoil, [which holds] 60 percent." Thus, applications of leaf mold will significantly help reduce the likelihood of

plant stress in drought situations.

Leaf mold is also a great soil amendment, decomposing slowly to release nutrients to the soil over time. You can use leaf mold wherever you would use compost or use it as a fine mulch or ingredient in potting soil or worm bin bedding.

Mulching

As a mulch, leaves help keep the soil cool and moist in summer and warm and protected from the compaction and erosion of rain in winter. As the leaves break down they also add nutrients to the soil and provide a perfect environment for earthworms to thrive.

However, most leaves are slightly acidic so keep this in mind when using them. Your soil pH may need to be raised by applying dolomite lime. For plants that prefer acidic soil (i.e. strawberries), pine needles and oak leaves work well as mulch.

Because leaves are so small, they are easy to work with and can easily be shaped to fit around the trunks of trees and stems of perennial plants. Keep the leaves a few inches away from trunks and stems, as continued contact with leaves could cause stems and trunks to rot. See Fact Sheet #7 for more information on mulching.

Other Uses for Leaves

For gardeners who do worm composting, leaves can be mixed 50/50 with finely shredded newspaper to make a

perfect bedding for the worms. See Fact Sheet #2 for more information on worm composting.

Leaves can also be used as bedding for urban chickens. They can be used alone or mixed with hay, straw, or sawdust.



Once the bedding is well-soiled with chicken manure, it can be used directly in the garden or added to a compost pile to further decompose.

Leaves to Be Cautious With

Though most leaves are fine for use in the home garden, there are a few that should be avoided.

Allelopathic Leaves Through a unique process called allelopathy, some plants release chemicals through their roots and their leaves that suppress the growth of other plants. Examples of these are: Black walnut (very strong), arbutus, pine, horse chestnut (only moderate), cedar (only slight). These leaves can sometimes be taken to a landscape yard, or can

be composted on their own and/or used in areas where you don't want plants to grow.

Tough Leaves Some leaves are harder to compost because they take longer to break down. Examples are: Holly, arbutus, cedar, pine, and oak. These can be left to decompose in their own pile or shredded before being added to a compost.



Common Leaves and Their Properties

Maple: Maple leaves are high in calcium and potassium and their wide leaf is a great mulch that breaks down quickly.

Oak: Oak leaves are abundant in the CRD. Contrary to popular belief, oak leaves are very beneficial for the garden. As a mulch they are long-lasting and thus require less work to maintain. Very acidic in nature, they are good for acid loving plants. In a compost, the acidity of moderate amounts of oak leaves can be balanced by the other material.

Pine Needles: Pine needles and other conifer leaves and needles are very acidic. Conifer leaves can be used to mulch acid-loving plants such as strawberries, blueberries, or rhododendrons. They can be added to your compost in small quantities.

Cherry: Though not very high in nutrients, cherry leaves are abundant in some areas of the CRD.



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