Save money by using leaves as a mulch

Leaves are falling from our deciduous trees in Northwest Florida. Instead of raking them up and bagging them, consider using them as mulch or adding them to your compost pile.

Mulch is any material placed on the soil surface to moderate the soil environment and enhance landscape aesthetics.

There are many "green" benefits to applying mulch. Organic mulch improves soil fertility as it decomposes, reducing the need for fertilizers. Mulches help maintain soil moisture by reducing evaporation so less supplemental irrigation is needed. They inhibit weed germination and growth, reducing the need for herbicides. Mulch buffers soil temperatures keeping soils warmer in the winter and cooler in the summer.

Mulch around trees and shrubs makes maintenance easier, reducing the likelihood of damage from string trimmers or mowers. In an area that is difficult to mow, irrigate, or maintain, use mulch to replace turf or ground cover. Consider placing mulch in shady areas where plants don't grow well.

Leaves can be used alone as a mulch but tend to blow away in windy locations and can be washed from beds during heavy rain showers. Leaves do best as a mulching material when they’re shredded. Non-shredded leaves and grass clippings can form a thick mat that makes water penetration nearly impossible.

If you don’t have a shredder, don’t worry. Leaves can be shredded using the lawn mower.

Sometimes there is reluctance to use leaves as mulch because it is not as attractive as some commercial mulch materials. This problem can be overcome by adding a thin layer of a more attractive mulch on top of the leaves.

Some people also worry that weed seed may be gathered with yard trash when the leaves are collected and then distributed with the mulch. If this is a concern, yard trash may be partially composted. In the composting process, the compost pile heats and inactivates most weed seed. However, after partially composting yard trash, use only the particles larger than 1.5 inches for mulch. Yard trash breaks down during composting, and the use of smaller particles as mulch could smother roots of landscape plants by...
reducing soil aeration.

Always maintain a 2- to 3-inch layer around established trees, shrubs, and bedding plants. Adding more mulch can harm plants because mulch intercepts rain and irrigation meant for plants' root systems.

Avoid "volcano mulching." When mulch is piled against the base of a tree, it holds moisture, encouraging rot in the trunk. Mulch piled against the trunks of young trees may also create a habitat for rodents that chew the tender bark, and can ultimately kill the trees.

Experts recommend at least an eight foot circle of mulch around a tree. Remember that in a forest a tree’s entire root system (which usually extends well beyond the drip line) would naturally be mulched by fallen leaves. If you can’t do a large mulch circle, spread mulch at least to the drip line of the canopy.

Sometime mulches can become matted, preventing water and air from seeping through. Simply, rake the mulch to refresh its appearance and benefit plantings.

Throwing away leaves is a waste of time and money. Mulching leaves simply recycles a natural resource, giving you richer soil for free.

Theresa Friday is the Environmental Horticulture Extension Agent for Santa Rosa County. The use of trade names, if used in this article, is solely for the purpose of providing specific information. It is not a guarantee, warranty, or endorsement of the product name(s) and does not signify that they are approved to the exclusion of others.

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