What to do with Falling Leaves

It's that time of year again. Leaves are rapidly falling from deciduous trees so it's a good time to stop and think about options for handling the litter. Although a scattering of leaves won't harm the lawn, excessive cover will prevent sunlight from reaching the turfgrass plants. Turf left in this state for an extended period will be unable to make the carbohydrates needed to carry it through the winter.

There are options for dealing with the fallen leaves other than bagging them up and putting them out for the trash collector. Composting is a great way to handle the refuse. The compost can then be used in the vegetable garden and flower beds to improve the soil structure. If you do not compost, you can add 2 to 4 inches of leaves to the vegetable gardens and flower beds where annual plants have completed their season and till into the soil. Remember, when you are tilling make sure to till slow and deep with your rototiller. Better still, use your shovel or spade and get some exercise.

If the soil is dry, water to begin the decomposition process. After about two weeks you can repeat the process with another application of organic materials. This can continue until the soil begins to freeze in December. If rainfall occurs, don't work soils when they are wet because soil structure can be damaged. Organic materials will decompose over the winter and be ready for your spring planting next year.

Another option is to simply mow the leaves with a mulching mower and let shredded leaves filter into the turf canopy. A side-discharge mower will also work, but it won't shred the leaves as thoroughly. This method will be most effective if you do it often enough so leaf litter isn't too thick. Mow while you can still see grass peeking through the leaves.
You may wonder whether this practice will be detrimental to the lawn in the long run. Researchers at Michigan State University used a mulching mower to shred up to about one pound of leaves per square yard of lawn (one pound is equal to approximately 6 inches of leaves piled on the grass) for five consecutive years. They found no long-term detrimental effects of the shredded leaves on turf quality or thatch thickness.

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