



The
complete
guide
to...
autumn
leaves
by



Why clear leaves?

Gardeners get to appreciate a spectacular annual show as the shaggy coats of trees turn shades of ruby red and russet. But as they moult, this wonder of nature can become a seasonal nuisance. All around the country, mountains of leafy debris are collected and disposed of, accompanied by the sound of scraping rakes and wailing blowers. Generally, it is assumed that leaves need to be cleared because they are a mess and cause damage to our beds and borders. Much of this fear is misplaced and if we are too hasty to tidy up, we will miss a trick!

Leaves provide vital shelter for many of our garden friends over the frozen months. From toads to hedgehogs to bumblebees, a cosy duvet gives just enough protection to see them through to spring. Better still, with just a little work, leaves can be re-purposed as a fantastic free resource, forming a basic ingredient in any good compost recipe!

However, sometimes leaf clearing *is* necessary so read on to find out when to tidy, and when to relax...

Did you know...

Of our UK native butterfly species, 9 spend the coldest months as an egg; 31 spend it as a caterpillar; 11 as a chrysalis; and five remain in adult form. Of those who hunker down as a caterpillar or chrysalis, many rely on the leaf litter to provide protection from cold temperatures and predators.



Don't be too hasty with the rake!

Reasons to relax

Save your aching arms and sore backs. Assume that leaves on garden borders, stuck down the back of the shed, or under trees, should be left over the winter as a home to the critters we share our gardens with. Nature loves scruffy nooks and crannies, and an epidemic of over-tidiness is contributing to long term wildlife decline.

In garden borders, a layer of leaves can help keep off frost from precious plant roots. Under trees, leaf litter mimics natural woodland conditions and is the best way to keep your trees healthy! In time, microbial soil life will incorporate the leaves, helping to aerate your soil and bulk up its organic matter content; vital for locking in moisture during drought and keeping soil open through wet winters. As spring comes around and the temporary residents of our seasonal wildlife refuges seek the sun, any excess leaves that haven't been consumed by the soil can then be collected and put to good use in the compost bin. Wait until your garden plants start to grow again before collecting.

With that said, see the next page for four situations where clearing leaves is a good idea.

Did you know...

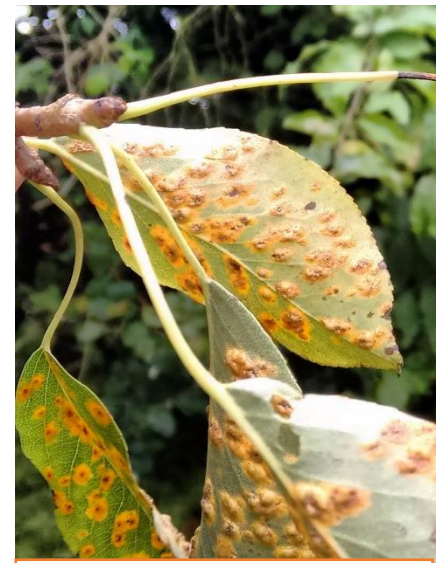
Between 50-80% of the nutrients taken up by trees over a year end up in their leaves! In autumn, trees re-absorb some nutrients from leaves back into the trunk. The compounds that are left in the leaves contain pigments which give leaves their autumn colour! Amazingly, those compounds are present all year but are disguised by green chlorophyll. When the leaves fall and rot into the soil, their nutrients become available to the trees again and are re-used in future years.



Leaves amongst this shady woodland border will do no harm at all.

Good reasons for clearing leaves

1. **On lawns** – Heavy leaf fall on lawns will kill turf, especially if your lawn is already on heavy or wet soil. However, a light smattering is fine as they will be taken into the soil by worms which are doing the work of aerating your lawn for you! In spring, worm casts can simply be brushed over before mowing.
2. **Around plants prone to rot** – Alpines, plants from arid regions (like the Mediterranean) and plants from areas that freeze over the winter generally don't like to be soggy around the crown. Winter wet can be more damaging than a hard frost, so remove leaves from around the surface of plants that have died down, and from within the crown of sensitive evergreens so they don't rot.
3. **Areas with low growing bulbs** – If you grow miniature Daffodils, species Crocus, Cyclamen, Winter Aconite and more, a very thick layer of leaves might obscure their delightful flowers in spring. Raking over them when they are flowering could damage them, so remove excess leaves in advance.
4. **Diseased leaves** – If you have a plant showing signs of distress, first check if the cause is a pest or disease. Some problems can recur if affected leaves are left on the ground; common examples include pear rust, rose blackspot and chestnut leaf miner. These leaves are best removed and sent off in council green waste bins to commercial composting. Then, mulch underneath affected plants to cover over any leaves you missed.



Pear rust symptoms.

How to use leaves

If you *have* to clear leaves off your lawn, or you are collecting up an excess still hanging around in the spring, don't throw them away! Look on your leaves as a fantastic resource which can be put to good use. Follow one of the suggestions below and leaves will turn from a menace to marvellous mulch!

1. Good compost needs a 50/50 mix of green (grass clippings, vegetable peel) and brown material (brown leaves, shredded twigs) mixed together. Often, there is a glut of grass clippings in spring and summer when browns are in short supply. Store leaves in used compost bags and mix with grass when needed.



Leaves stored out of the way, ready for the compost heap in spring.

2. Make leafmould by storing leaves in used compost bags with holes poked in the sides and bottom. Alternatively, make a 'bin' by hammering four wooden stakes into the ground as a square, then wrapping around with chicken wire. Fill with leaves and after two years they will have decomposed and can be used as a mulch around the garden. To quicken the process, shred leaves before storing by mowing over them.

3. Mix in layers of shredded green comfrey leaves when filling a 'bin' or bags. This adds nutrients to the leaf mould, which acts as a feed for plants when mulching.

4. Make your own seed sowing compost with 50/50 finely sieved leaf mould and sharp sand.

My leaves wont rot down. What is going on?

In time, all leaves will break down into the soil. However, you might find that certain leaves take much longer than others for a few reasons.

- A. Leaves which are high in lignin (a plant fibre) like Oak, Hornbeam and Magnolia will break down slowly. Generally, these leaves feel 'thicker' than others like Ash and Cherry. These make excellent leafmould, but might take a little longer to fully decompose than lighter leaves, just leave them cooking until ready.
- B. Leaves with a waxy cuticle (a wax like layer on the top of the leaf) take *very* long to break down. Think of plants like Laurel, Holly and Rhododendron with their thick glossy leaves. Waxy leaves won't break down well if left on the soil surface or incorporated whole into compost heaps. To encourage quicker decomposition, shred leaves by mowing over them before composting, which greatly increases the surface area for microbial life to work on. If you have large amounts of waxy leaves, it may be best to dispose of them in council green waste which compost them more efficiently.
- C. Very acidic soils tend to have less of the microbial soil life which naturally break leaves down. Over time, leaves can build up beneath trees and shrubs without decomposing. If you find this is the case, remove excess leaves in spring then compost them or make leafmould. Then use that compost, which is full of beneficial bacteria, fungi, worms and invertebrates as a mulch under trees, which will improve the amount of microbial life in the soil. Over time, you may find that leaves start to break down themselves over a year as the soil life improves.

Quick fire questions:

What about ponds?

You should keep leaves out of ponds as they can introduce nutrients and use up oxygen. The answer is to net your pond for a short period as leaves drop, just get in there early!

What about conifers and pine needles?

In small quantities, add conifer needles and clippings to the compost heap. Pine needles can be used to make an acidic leafmould, which is good for plants like Rhododendron and Camelias. Put these into a separate bin.

What's best to make, compost or leafmould?

Leafmould is great for opening up heavy soils, bulking up light ones and as a mulch under trees. It can be applied year round but is low in nutrition. If you have hungry plants, especially in vegetable beds, compost is the best option. Of course, most of us have plenty of leaves to spare, so make both!

What is all this talk about mulch?

Mulch is simply anything you apply to the surface of soil. Spread well-rotted compost or leaf mould around plants up to a depth of 5cm (2 inches).

Where can I find more information about compost and leafmould?

RHS on compost - <https://www.rhs.org.uk/advice/profile?pid=444>

RHS on leafmould - <https://www.rhs.org.uk/advice/profile?pid=478>

Garden Organic on compost -

<https://www.gardenorganic.org.uk/compost>

Garden Organic on leafmould -

<https://www.gardenorganic.org.uk/leafmould>