Far from a nuisance, fallen autumn leaves should be treasured as a future soil improver. Make the most of this seasonal dividend

Dealing with fallen leaves is synonymous with autumn. Most gardeners who are lucky enough to have deciduous trees will be well versed with the practice of collecting them, although many may not make the most of this valuable resource.

Leaf litter is a source of free organic matter – and should be used to replenish the garden – either left where they lie, where appropriate, or collected and made into leafmould.

If we take our cue from nature and look to deciduous forests, leaf litter there provides a blanket that enriches soil as it breaks down. On a larger scale, an alternative method breaks down more quickly, so it can be worth going over piles with a mower first.

Leaves best collected

- Leaves that have fallen onto evergreens such as conifers, evergreen azaeleas and silver-leaved plants (Artemisia, Lavandula) should be removed promptly before they cause foliage underneath to decay.
- Those that fall into plants which suffer from winter wet, such as yuccas and Erica species.
- Slugs-susceptible plants, such as Echeveria (especially seedlings), need swift uncovering.
- Those on gravel gardens, paths, drives and drains.
- Those on lawns and in/on ornamental grasses.
- Ponds and water features will rapidly become clogged if leaves are not removed.

Tools for the job

- Rakes: On a lawn this can be a light plastic or a metal spring-tined rake. Thin spring-tine rakes are great for getting in between plants in beds.
- Leaf blowers now come in various guises. Those used at RHS Garden Wisley are connected to a solar-powered battery; these are lightweight and quieter, in addition to the environmental benefit.
- Use two flat parallel edges of an eight-tooth broom to scoop up leaves.
- On a larger scale, a mower can be used to collect leaves with the added benefit of shredding at the same time, which speeds up the decomposition process.
- A Leaflower now comes in various guises. Those used at RHS Garden Wisley are connected to a solar-powered battery; these are lightweight and quieter, in addition to the environmental benefit.
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When to leave in place

An alternative to removing leaves from areas of rougher grass is to use a mower without a collection hood to finely chop the leaves directly back into the grass. Similarly, in orchards it is fine for fallen leaves to rot down into the grass during winter.

In woodland plantings (below), shade beds or at the backs of borders, the easiest method is to let any fallen leaves decompose directly onto the bed.

Using fallen leaves

Once gathered, leaves can be added to the compost heap to counterbalance a mass of green material such as grass clippings, or kept separate and converted into precious leafmould.

Leafmould is a great soil improver, either mixed in or as a surface mulch. It will help break down heavy clay, aid sandy soils to retain moisture; and increase worm and micro-organism activity in both situations.

The natural place to apply leafmould is around trees, shrubs and woodland bulbs (it is also useful in aiding drainage in potting-compost mixes).

Making leafmould

Depending on the scale and space available, the easiest way to make leafmould is to collect leaves into a bin bag, loosely tie the top and then pierce holes in the sides. The leaves need to be moist, so add a little water if necessary. These can then be stacked out of the way for 12-18 months, in which time the leaves will break down. On a larger scale, an alternative method is to create a cage using chicken wire and place the leaves in this. Shredded leaves will break down more quickly, so it can be worth going over piles with a mower first.

Place moist leaves into bin bags (above) and any fallen leaves in a cage (below). A wire cage works well for larger amounts.

More from the RHS

For more information search ‘Leafmould’ at the RHS website: www.rhs.org.uk