

Garden Corner

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Master Gardeners of Johnson County Missouri

There are many things I love about gardening: there is always something to do – something to learn - something to discover – something to excite. Along those lines we find ourselves at the end of the growing season and it's time to put our gardens to rest for the winter. A major task yet remains: leaves! Now that we are in Zone 6a our average first frost date has moved to early November which means the leaves will be falling later in the year. When they do begin to litter your yard, what are you going to do with them? May I suggest you consider setting aside a spot in your landscape and creating a pile of leaves to be used as leaf mold.

Before describing the process of creating leaf mold, a brief listing of the advantages of using your leaves would seem appropriate. When applied to both flower and vegetable beds, leaf mold provides much needed nutrients to both the soil and the microorganisms which promote healthy plants. It is also a terrific soil amendment assisting in the breakdown of our clay and producing a friable (loose, flaky consistency) base for plant growth. The water retention of leaf mold borders on the incredible: doubles the water holding capacity of the soil. And, save but for a little work on your part, it's free!

So how do you make leaf mold? First, find a place where you can store your mountain of leaves. If you follow this process, the leaves will remain in that area for at least six months. Yes, some sources state it will take one to two years to create useable leaf mold. Not so! If you use this method. As you collect your leaves, shred them the best you can – the smaller the leaf particles the quicker the decomposing process. Running over your leaves with a mower will accomplish this – so will putting them through a shredder. As the layers of leaves build in your leaf mold pile, sprinkle a handful of fertilizer in between the layers – speeds up the breaking down process. Once you have completed your pile of shredded leaves, slightly dampen the heap. On warm days, turn your pile with a pitch fork or if you're lucky enough to have one – a small tiller.

Wasn't that easy? When April or May comes around, you can go to your leaf mold dome and begin to use it to side dress all your plants, use it as mulch in your beds, or add as an addition to your potting mix. One note of caution for the snake lovers in our group. Yes, the warm, wormy, buggy environment of your leaf mold does attract your local snakes so be careful as you "fork" out the contents so as not to disturb our slithery friends.

For your questions/comments/ concerns write: 370 NW 121 Rd., Warrensburg, MO 64093 or email: maandpak@embargmail.com and I'll get right back with you. It has been dry, hope you're watering.