

The Garden Corner

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Master Gardeners of Johnson County Missouri

Ah! Fall in Missouri; it just doesn't get any better than this! The hummingbirds will be departing for warmer climes, Monarchs will be winging their way south of the border, and the winter migration of our feathered friends will be in full swing. On or about October 15th we will have our first frost and the trees will shed their summer foliage. Being the cheapskate that I am, I always look forward to this time of year and the wonderful free gift of all those leaves. Using a process I learned as a kid, all those piles of leaves will be turned into leaf mold (or leaf mulch) to be used in the gardens come spring. We will get to the process in a second; but, first let us review the advantages of making and using your own leaves for mulch.

In 1987, the University of Iowa conducted a program to document the water absorption/retention qualities of leaf mold and their study found that it retained 500 percent of its weight in water! I don't know about you but that tells me if applied properly to garden beds we would not have to water as much or as frequently. That is not all. The study also confirmed by adding a three inch layer of mulch over successive years provided a marked increase and improvement in soil structure; especially for sandy and heavy (clay) soils. In addition to the water retentive and soil improvement factors, the study also demonstrated a huge increase in the presence of soil life (earthworms) and beneficial bacteria. Considering all these wonderful benefits to the home gardener, doesn't it make you wonder why we see piles of leaves being burned this time of year? Oh well, to each his own ...

So, how do you make leaf mulch? Depending upon how much effort you put into working your pile of leaves, it will take from nine months to three years to turn it into leaf mold. That is too long in my opinion. Here is a much faster method. By using a shredder or lawn mower you can break the leaves down into smaller particles which will speed up the decomposing process. Once you have gathered or raked all your leaves and shredded them, make sure you add some water – just moist; not soggy. Some gardeners cover their leaf piles with a tarp to retain the moisture and provide a little heat – up to you. A couple of times during the winter when we have those unusually warm days, I crank up the Mantis tiller and “turn” the leaves thereby breaking down the contents further and redistributing the moisture. By March or April, the leaves gathered last fall have been converted to leaf mold and are ready to be applied to the garden. Garden chores just do not get much easier than that; and, it is free! Did I mention that I'm a cheapskate?

Well, that will do it for another month. I hope each and every one of you are in good health and high spirits and are able to get out and enjoy this wonderful time of year. If you stumble across a problem or have a question I and your Johnson County Master Gardeners are here for you. Just write to 370 NW 121 Rd., Warrensburg, MO 64093 or email: mandpak@embarqmail.com and we will get right back with you. Until next month – See you in the garden!