The Garden Corner

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Master Gardeners of Johnson County Missouri

            There is a wondrous spectacle taking place right now – the dark, brilliant reds; the golden hue of yellows; the sun beaming oranges – fall in all its splendor.  Have you even wondered what causes the leaves to change colors?  Is it the length of the day in terms of sunshine?  Or, maybe the change in temperatures or time of year?  Could the amount of recent rainfall have an impact?  If you thought (like I once did) that the amount of rainfall had anything to do with it, you’d be Way Off Base!

            Yes! It’s the time of year.  But, really that answer doesn’t do justice to the question.  We all know that chlorophyll is the green pigment in the leaf.  There are other properties within that same leaf that also have the colors of red and orange or many other colors. What we see most of the growing season is the green leaf.  When the growing season is over, the plant stops producing chlorophyll; and, in fact, begins to “take back” and store the unused chlorophyll for next season.  As the chlorophyll is slowly reabsorbed by the host plant, the other colors already present in the leaf begin to emerge.  As Paul Harvey use to say: “That’s the rest of the story.”

            When the “light” show is over, those leaves are going to come tumbling down and along with them comes my annual plea to do something other than burn or toss them away.  Some folks have so many leaves they are at a loss as to what to do with them all.  Here are a few ideas you might want to consider.

            If possible, leave them lay where they are.  If you can do this, you are making a significant contribution to the world of moth and butterfly.  Already present in our leaves are the assorted eggs of the species Lepidoptera.  Yep! Next year’s moths and butterflies.  I know, nobody wants to be an ax murderer, so what do you do?  No, don’t leave them on your lawn; unless you’re tired of mowing – matted leaves will kill your grass!  Here at the Park, we clean out most of our flower beds; leaving seed heads and ornamental grasses for winter interest.   All the removed leaves are shredded to become leaf mold/mulch to be used next spring.  Besides being free, leaf mold makes a tremendous, organic soil amendment; but, sadly it’s extremely difficult on the eggs of the Lepidoptera! In addition, we arranged one foot deep rings of leaves out to the drip line of the trees.  Where possible, we try to keep the leaves with the tree they came from.  Why?  The caterpillars and the eggs are almost always located near their host plant.  Keep the leaves with the host tree and you cut the travel distance for the Bug when it comes back in the spring.

            It’s a wonderful time of year to spend outside working in the yard.  While you’re out there if a question pops into your mind, give me a holler at 370 NW 121 Rd., Warrensburg, MO 64093 or email at: maandpak@embarqmail.com and we’ll get to the bottom of it.  Until next month – enjoy those beautiful leaves!