

Bag the rake, not the leaves

If a group of master gardeners and environmental activists in Bedford has its way, that time-honored fall tradition of raking leaves into giant piles, to be hauled away by town workers or blown away by landscapers, will soon be about as cool as eating canned vegetables at the height of summer or packing your kids' lunches in a sea of Styrofoam.

The campaign, called "Leave Leaves Alone!" encourages homeowners and landscapers to just mow over the fallen leaves and leave them be — to serve as ground-up mulch and organic fertilizer for your lawn. The organizers don't even want you to gather the leaves for your compost pile, or, heaven forbid, push them into the street to eventually be sucked up and hauled away by cash-strapped municipalities.

"What we're really trying to stress is mowing the leaves into lawns," says Fiona Mitchell, a Bedford Hills master gardener who helped launch the campaign earlier this year. "We have a lot of people say, 'Oh yeah, I already compost my leaves.' But mowing them into lawns is more efficient than moving them to another location to compost."

It's a big time-saver, Mitchell says, and it uses much less fuel for leaf blowers — or elbow grease for people who rake their yards by hand. "People are going to mow

their lawns anyway right through the fall, so there is no extra fuel — or noise — involved."

The "Leave Leaves Alone!" campaign in Bedford is part of a larger green movement within Westchester communities, including Bronxville, Pleasantville and Chappaqua, to encourage homeowners and landscapers to leave leaves where they fall.

Last fall, Anne Jaffe Holmes, coordinator of environmental projects at the Greenburgh Nature Center, helped launch a program called "Leaves: Love 'Em and Leave 'Em" in the village of Irvington, where she lives.

"We want to teach people that this ritual that we do is actually wasteful and expensive and unnecessary," says Jaffe Holmes.

In Bedford, Mitchell points out that town workers spend 2,500 man-hours over a five-week period scooping up curbside leaves.

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If you mow once a week, one pass with a mulching lawnmower throughout the fall should be enough to chop your leaves into barely noticeable mulch that will quickly decompose and nourish your soil. If you have a thick layer of leaves, you may have to go over them a few times with your mower to do the trick.

This time of year, many professional landscapers put special mulching blades onto their mowers to pulverize the leaves into tiny bits. Tim Downey, the owner of Aesthetic Landscape Care in Hastings-on-Hudson, uses a commercial mulching blade called a Gator to chop up leaves on his clients' lawns, while he's also cutting their grass. "I essentially take nothing off their properties now," he says.

David Duarte, the owner of Five Brothers Landscaping in Yonkers, has been mulching his clients' leaves and adding them to their garden beds and lawns since founding his company in 1989.

"Everyone wants to create good soil, and by mulching leaves and putting them on your garden, you are creating good soil," he says. "The end result is that you don't need fertilizer, you don't need insecticides — the plants' health is just better all around."

"I have gardens that are 100 percent pesticide free, with no fertilizer added," he says. "It's really the best thing you can do for your garden."

Duarte is known for servicing a clientele of sophisticated, environmentally conscious gardeners around Westchester. "I have a

very picky group of people around me," he says with a laugh. "But it works — and they see the results."

A 10-inch pile of leaves reduces to a single inch after they are shredded, he says. Adding a 2- to 3-inch layer of shredded leaves to your garden in fall means that you will be creating a new layer of top-quality soil for your plants next spring. The leaves also create a good home for worms, which add even more enrichment.

Duarte uses a higher-powered leaf shredder instead of a lawnmower to make the process go faster and to get a finer mulch. But lawnmowers work fine, too, he says — you just may have to run over the leaves a few times.

Leaf mulch is better than wood chips, he notes, because the leaves have more nutrients.

You can also just leave the leaves where they fall in your garden beds and around your shrubs and trees. It's not as tidy

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looking as raking or blowing them out of the beds and then shredding them, but they'll still protect the roots of your shrubs and perennials over the winter as they begin to decompose and add organic nourishment for your plants.

Mitchell says that she and her "Leave Leaves Alone" group have gotten great feedback so far, especially from homeowners. "Everyone loves the idea of less leaf blower noise," she says. "A lot of people say they remember their grandparents doing it this way."

"Like any movement like this, we know this is not going to be instant," she adds. "We know it will be gradual — we're hoping to change one person at a time."



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From left, Carol

McLeod, Margi Corsello, Fox Lane senior Rachel Stern (representing Fox Lane Youth in Action Club), Diane Greco, Fiona Mitchell, Jeanne Markel, Cathy Clare and Charlotte Morsch are among a group of Bedford environmentalists and gardeners who have organized a campaign called "Leave Leaves Alone!" which encourages homeowners to stop raking their leaves. / Joe Larese/The Journal News

More garden news

Check out Bill Cary's In the Garden blog at <http://gardening.lohublogs.com> .

TO LEARN MORE

The Bedford residents behind the "Leave Leaves Alone!" campaign are hosting a free presentation on managing fall leaves at 7 p.m. Oct. 6 at the Bedford Village Library at 32 Village Green. Two landscapers who mow leaves into their clients' lawns and mulch them for use in perennial beds will be sharing their experiences and client reactions. Pre-registration preferred: 914-234-3570. For more information, call Fiona Mitchell at 914-261-4986.

On the web: www.leaveleavesalone.org .

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