

# THE KEY TO A HEALTHY LAWN - IT'S FALLING FROM THE SKY

**By Anna Snider**

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Most residents of Westchester County are grateful for our tree-lined streets with their lush canopies- until the leaf canopy has dropped on their lawn. Then they hope for a strong wind storm to blow all of their leaves into their neighbor's yard. Every year home owners spend hours raking their lawns and bagging the leaves for pickup. In turn, municipalities spend millions of dollars collecting the leaves and trucking them out of the county. All of this time and money could easily be saved- and it's all part of saving the planet.

Most municipalities in Westchester do not have the space or the resources to process the leaves collected from their streets, so mountain after mountain of leaves is trucked out the county, sometimes as far as New Hampshire. Not only are fossil fuels being burned to truck leaves long distances, but Westchester residents are missing out on a valuable resource.

Many parts of Westchester are wooded, and suburban lawns are covered with leaves this time of the year. Homeowners like to rake all of the leaves off of their lawns to avoid having a thick layer of leaves smother the grass. Leaves are often raked or blown onto the terrace or into the street for pick up, either bagged or unbagged. This poses a few environmental problems for all residents of Westchester County.

First is the problem of groundwater pollution. Leaves contain a lot of phosphorus, an element that causes eutrophication of water bodies and leads to algal blooms, low oxygen, and other drinking water quality issues. When leaves are piled in the street before pickup, the leaves along with the phosphorus wash into the storm sewers and the phosphorus finds its way into our water supply. This phosphorus issue may sound familiar- Westchester County recently passed a law banning phosphorus fertilizers on lawns in order to protect our drinking water quality.

Another problem with removing leaves from your lawn is that you are throwing away a valuable resource. Good gardeners know that you need good soil to grow healthy plants. And good soil starts with organic matter. Fall leaves are a great source of organic matter for your lawn as well as for your ornamental and vegetable beds. Good compost is expensive, so it just makes sense to conserve the organic matter that is naturally in your yard.

If all of this talk of wasted money and water pollution has got you down, don't worry, the solution is simple- don't rake! Simply run your mulching lawn mower over the leaves and let them work their way down through the grass blades to the soil. A mowing height of three inches or more will help conceal the leaves. Soon earthworms, bugs and microorganisms will do their job and break down the leaves and make the nutrients available to the grass. If you have so many leaves that you feel that your lawn would be overwhelmed, you can mulch your ornamental and vegetable beds with a layer of chopped up leaves.

You can also compost fall leaves along with other yard waste or by themselves. You can simply pile them at the back of your yard, but they will break down more quickly if they are chopped up by the lawn mower. For more information on leaf composting, see our *A Simple Guide to Leaf Composting* brochure on our website [http://counties.cce.cornell.edu/westchester/PDF/A\\_Simple\\_Guide\\_to\\_Leaf\\_Composting.pdf](http://counties.cce.cornell.edu/westchester/PDF/A_Simple_Guide_to_Leaf_Composting.pdf)

Now that you know what a valuable resource all of those fallen leaves are, you might be enviously eyeing your neighbors' leaves!



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