

Do I HAVE To Rake the Leaves?

AGRI-VIEWS

by Chuck Otte, Geary County Extension Agent

Two years ago, by the time the 1st of November rolled around, most of the leaves had already fallen. This year it seems like we're just getting a good start on the leaf drop and there's still a lot of green leaves on a lot of trees! Invariably I'll be asked, or I'll ask myself, "do I really need to rake the leaves off the lawn?" Sometimes it may seem like busy work, and other times it is totally justified!

Tree leaves are a very valuable resource. There can literally be several hundred pounds of leaves on a tree during a growing season. A large mature tree can have a ton or two of leaves. This is obvious if you've ever noticed the height of branch tips in the summer as opposed to the winter. But once they start to fall off, leaves have lost some of that weight, mainly the water component. But a large tree can still have a couple hundred pounds of weight in fall leaves.

These falling and fallen leaves have a whole host of nutrients including nitrogen and phosphorus and perhaps the most valuable component of all, all that carbon that we collectively call organic matter. If "captured" and utilized as soil additives in gardens or as mulch or in a compost pile, these leaves can be a great addition to any home gardener's landscape. Which still doesn't answer the question of whether one HAS to rake the leaves.

The potential problem comes from issues with the turf, namely getting a leaf load that is so heavy and matted down that it actually starts to smother the turf. Turf smothering can come from a heavy load of leaves that blocks out all the sunlight or it can come from a heavy leaf load that becomes matted down with rain or snow to the point that it actually shuts off air flow to the grass.

Some autumns are dry and because we have wind in Kansas, the leaves just start moving around with every little breeze. The leaves blow around, they start to break apart and they just start to disappear. Other years, just as the leaves start to fall and before the wind can blow them around, here comes a big rain or snow event and everything gets plastered onto the lawn. We had this just a few years ago.

Surprisingly, small leaves can create more of a problem and be harder to deal with than larger leaves. Studies have been done to see how much of a leaf load a lawn can handle and what it usually comes down to is how much rain or snow is expected. If you don't have a heavy snow or rain event, several inches of leaves can be tolerated by lawns, but it is advisable to try to shred them up with a lawn mower on a regular basis. Once the leaves start to get chopped up, they break down faster and just sort of disappear into the turf.

So let's get this discussion to the bottom line. If you have no need for the leaves as organic matter and regular mowing shreds the leaves up to where you can see half of the turf, don't bother to rake them. If a rain event comes along and really creates a matted thatchy mess, you'd better get the rake out and get to work. If you can make use of the organic matter then rake them or mow and bag them and put them to use. Using the lawn mower to bag the leaves is a great way to pick them up to dump them into a compost pile or directly on a garden. I find that the combination of the dry leaves and some moist grass blades makes a good combination for composting. Or bag them up and use them for mulch on tender plants. But whatever the situation, if the leaves become so thick that the grass is becoming pale under the leaves, you'd better get raking!