

To Rake or Not to Rake

AGRI-VIEWS

by Chuck Otte, Geary County Extension Agent

For many homeowners, the question at this time of year comes down to, "Do I rake the leaves off my yard or do I not rake the leaves?" History and tradition (or perhaps your spouse or neighbor's expectations) dictate that you have to rake the leaves off your yard. You can drive around any town in October and November and see leaves bagged up and sitting on the curb. You can see piles of leaves set on fire (mainly in smaller towns where you can still do this) and you'll see dark green lawns with nary a leaf in sight.

In reality, we've been wasting a lot of time and effort doing something that is primarily done for aesthetic purposes only. In many cases our lawns would be better off if we didn't rake the leaves off of them; I'll get to that in a minute. One of the reasons that we've historically raked the leaves is because we don't want to smother the grass and that is a legitimate concern. I have had areas of my lawn that had lots of leaves, small leaves in fact, that became matted down with heavy rain or snow and did kill some grass. But this has been an exception, not the rule.

We'd be better off to simply take the lawn mower and mulch the leaves up. Don't set the lawnmower low, but make sure it is set up to mulch, not bag or discharge them, mulch. And then once or twice a week, mow over the yard, or at least the areas with quite a few leaves. The leaves came from the trees in our yards. The trees used nutrients from the soil to grow those leaves. When you mulch the leaves with your mower it makes them easier to filter down through the grass to the soil surface where they can start to decompose and return all of those nutrients back to the soil. In some studies, 3 to 4 inches of leaves have been mulched down with a couple of lawn mower trips to where they aren't a problem.

There's also some evidence that by mulching the leaves with the mower you can reduce weed competition. Many weed seeds need bare soil and sunshine to germinate. When you mulch the leaves you create a little cover over the soil surface making it more difficult for weed seeds to germinate and get established. We do need to use some common sense especially if we have a sudden heavy drop of wet leaves or simply a lot of leaves. If you've run the mower over the lawn a couple of times in different directions and you still can't see any grass, you probably need to remove some of the leaves.

Recent information has also been circulating that leaving leaves on the lawn can be of benefit to wildlife, especially birds and butterflies. There is some truth in this. Leaves on the lawn provide cover for certain insects which birds will feed on as they flip over leaves and scratch around in the soil. Some species of butterflies/moths also overwinter in turf areas in chrysalises/cocoons. Leaving a little extra cover on the turf can improve their winter survival.

If it becomes necessary to rake up or bag some leaves with the mower, for whatever reason, please don't waste this valuable organic matter resource. Leaves can be tilled into a garden to improve the organic matter and thereby the tilth of the soil. Leaves, especially if mixed with some grass clippings, make a great start to a compost pile that you can then use next year for gardens, flower beds, or all around mulch. Contact the Extension Office if you need information on how to start a compost pile.

Bottom line, many lawns don't need to have the leaves raked off of them. The lawn will be just as well off, if not better, if you just mulch the leaves down. I would discourage a late low mowing however. Leave the mower at the height it was all summer. You can give it a shorter clean up mowing first thing next spring!