

Do I Have to Rake the Leaves?

AGRI-VIEWS

by Chuck Otte, Geary County Extension Agent

I'm sure there isn't a homeowner out there that hasn't at one time or another asked themselves in October or November, "Do I really have to rake those leaves up?" In years gone by it was an annual ritual to rake them into a big pile by the street and light them on fire. Perhaps before that though there'd be some jumping or diving into that pile of leaves! Of course, most municipalities now days are likely going to frown on burning piles of leaves in the street and I personally feel that it is a terrible waste of perfectly good organic matter.

So back to the question at hand, do you have to rake the leaves off your yard? In a nutshell, no, and yes; okay it all depends! I half jokingly and half seriously remind homeowners that this is Kansas and the wind does blow. If you wait long enough they'll probably blow somewhere else. But someone else's leaves are liable to blow into your yard too. But I think there's better things to do with those leaves.

I already said that they are a valuable source of organic matter. If you are willing and able to get out there every few days while they are falling and mow over them you can usually do a pretty good job of pulverizing them down into small enough pieces that they will filter down to the soil surface and decompose. If it's a dry autumn watering can help that and your lawn fertilizer can speed up the process! This works better if you have a mulching mower but even a standard non-mulching side discharge mower can help break the leaves up.

I can immediately here people expressing concern about this building up a thatch layer in their yard. Michigan State University researches looked at this several years ago where they mulched up one pound of leaves per square yard every fall for five years. At the end of the study they saw no long term effects from thatch thickness, turf quality, soil pH etc. How many leaves does it take to make one pound of leaves per square yard? It'll take about six inches worth of leaves!

But some people aren't going to like seeing that mulched up leaf residue on their nice green lawn. Okay, that's fair. So put the bagger on the mower and bag them up. But don't throw them away. Put them on your vegetable garden and till them into the soil. There's very few gardens around here that couldn't use more organic matter. Most tillers can handle a 2 to 3 inch layer of leaves (after they've gone through the mower and bagger) and work it into the soil. In fact, if you spread this out over several weeks you can do this three to four times!

Or add them to a compost pile. Especially if mixed with grass clippings you can make some high quality compost this way. Just make sure you remove the leaves from the lawn before you treat with weed killers! Burning leaves or removing them completely from the property is honestly my last option because they are such a valuable resource.

But what happens if you do nothing at all and just let the leaves lie to either breakdown or blow away. Well, many years, absolutely nothing "bad" will happen. Leaves will blow around, they'll break up or be mowed up and they'll slowly decompose. However, an early snow or extended rain event will mat the leaves down and that's when you have problems. Even a thin layer of leaves that have gotten matted down can start to smother grass. Surprisingly, I've had more problems with this with small leaves than big! So ultimately you may get by doing nothing with the leaves in your yard, unless we have a wet spell. If that happens, get ready to start raking!