

Making Ripples

Leave the Leaves

by Amanda Bancroft

Autumn is the best time of year to convince kids that you actually planted a rainbow tree in place of the old green-leafed one. Or you could go the scientific route and explain about the foliage phenomenon of deciduous trees, and how they turn shades of amber, red and purple as they lose chlorophyll due to shorter fall days and colder night temperatures. I recognize the science, but prefer to watch in awe as nature does her thing.

Yet beauty isn't everything. Some people, standing with their rakes in hand like weapons against disorderly yards, need a reminder of the science of leaves. Robert Fulghum (*All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten*) has the right idea about raking. "Old Mother Nature put the leaves where she wanted them and they made more earth. We need more earth...we're running out of it." He avoids raking and prefers to just enjoy the fall, encouraging his neighbor to leave the leaves for nature.

That's important, not only if one is lazy and needs an excuse to relax instead of work. It's important for the native species in your yard, and the soil health of the garden.

Of course, there are arguments in favor of raking leaves, too...they're just not ecological ones. Raking ensures that people running across your wet leaves will not slip, fall, and sue you. Raking also prevents native insects, rodents, and wildlife from taking refuge in your yard during winter. Those are great arguments if we want to wipe out pollinators and liability-proof our lawns.

While everyone must make their own choice about whether or not to rake, it's best if you actually know you have choices: rake, mulch, or let leaves lie. You can rake the leaves in some areas but spread them over other spots in the yard that might benefit, such as blanketing fragile young plants. Or mow the leaves with a mulcher when they're at their crunchiest. They'll decompose quickly and allow more nutrients to seep into your now-enhanced soil. Leaves are also great "brown" material for your composter, and can be added to balance out the "green" compost of kitchen scraps and yard clippings.

Yet perhaps the best reason, ecology aside, is that not raking leaves is better on your back! Raking can be great exercise, especially if you don't get outside very often. But why not take a walk instead, and enjoy these fleeting days full of the dazzling sights and earthy smells of nature's last hurrah before winter?

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