

The Second Life of a Leaf

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Photos by Cheryl Ames



Every autumn, trees release millions of leaves. We often think of them as the remnants of summer—the colorful evidence that chlorophyll has disappeared and the tree is preparing for winter. But a fallen leaf isn't really the end of the story. It is the beginning of another one.

Once a leaf reaches the ground, it becomes part of one of nature's most important recycling systems. Its nutrients return to the soil, its carbon becomes food for decomposers, and it can provide shelter for insects and other small creatures through the winter.



From Green Leaf to Forest Floor

When autumn arrives, the tree begins withdrawing valuable nutrients from its leaves. Chlorophyll breaks down, revealing the yellow and orange pigments that were there all along. Eventually, the leaf falls.

What looks like dead material is actually a package of nutrients waiting to be recycled.

A Leaf Is Food for the Soil

On the forest floor, fallen leaves become food for an enormous community of organisms. Fungi and bacteria begin breaking down the leaf's complex materials. Earthworms, insects and other small organisms feed on the decaying material or on the organisms doing the decomposition. Gradually, the leaf is transformed into organic matter and nutrients that become available to plants again. **Nothing is wasted.**

In a natural forest, there is no garbage truck hauling away the leaves. The leaves become part of the system that nourishes the next generation of plants.

Leaves Are Winter Shelter, Too

Fallen leaves provide another important service that is easy to overlook: **they create habitat.** Many insects and other small organisms spend part of their lives in leaf litter. Some overwinter there as eggs, larvae or adults. These creatures become food for birds and other wildlife.

That means a layer of leaves isn't simply something lying on the ground. It can be a miniature winter habitat for birds, salamanders, toads, frogs, bees, spiders, butterflies, and moths.

This is particularly important in urban and suburban landscapes, where tidying up every leaf can eliminate habitat that wildlife needs.

What About Our Trees?

Leaving some leaves in the landscape can benefit trees and shrubs as well. As leaves decompose, they contribute organic matter and nutrients to the soil. A layer of leaf litter can also help retain moisture and moderate soil temperatures.

Leaves can be especially useful when used as **natural mulch** in garden beds and around trees and shrubs. They don't necessarily have to remain exactly where they

fell. Raking them from lawns and moving them into planting beds or other appropriate areas allows us to keep their nutrients and ecological benefits on site.

For lawns, leaves can often be shredded with a mower and allowed to settle into the grass, where they gradually decompose.



Leave Some Leaves for Wildlife

The idea isn't necessarily to stop raking altogether. Leaves can create problems when they accumulate on sidewalks, streets or in places where they block drainage. Instead, think about **where leaves are removed and where they can be left.**

You might:

- Leave leaves beneath trees and shrubs.
- Move leaves from lawns into garden beds.
- Create a quiet corner of the yard where leaves can remain undisturbed through winter.
- Mulch leaves with a mower rather than bagging them.
- Leave some fallen leaves around perennial plants.

Where NOT to leave the leaves:

- Avoid blowing leaves into streets or storm drains where they could cause flooding.
- Too many leaves? If you must remove large quantities, use a local leaf-recycling or disposal program.

This approach turns autumn cleanup from “**How do I get rid of all these leaves?**” into “**Where can these leaves do the most good?**”

A Different Way to Look at Autumn

The spectacular colors of autumn are the visible part of the chlorophyll story. But when those colorful leaves fall, another process begins—one that is quieter and perhaps even more important. The leaf that once captured sunlight and made food for a tree now becomes food for the soil.

The green disappears. The recycling begins. Leave the leaves!

Resources

Leave the Leaves, Xerces Society for Invertebrate Conservation, www.xerces.org

National Leave the Leaves Month, National Wildlife Federation, www.nwf.org

The Surprising Benefits of Leaving Fallen Leaves on Your Lawn, Anne Readell,
October 3, 2025, Better Homes and Gardens, www.bhg.com