

Composting Leaves: How To Turn Fall Leaves Into Your Best Gardens Ever.

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We've often said that composting can save the world. Here's one of the ways. During the fall, our yards and landscapes yield tons of refuse, much of it the form of leaves. Those leaves, bagged and placed on curb sides across the country, contribute significantly to the trash that goes into our landfills. In 2006, even after many local governments had instituted yard waste recycling programs, leaves, grass clippings and the like made up [the largest component](#) by weight of everything that went into our landfills. Grass clipping were the largest component by weight of yard waste but leaves were by far the largest component in volume. By 2013, yard waste had fallen to third, behind paper products and food waste. Progress!

The reason things have improved? More communities, and even some states, have rules on the books that prevent yard waste from going into public landfills. [Waste 360 has the figures](#). 33.4 million tons of yard waste is generated in the U.S. every year. That's over 200 lbs for every man woman and child. 19.2 million tons, over 57%, is composted. One sobering fact: the percentage amount of yard waste disposal has been flat the last several years after declining precipitously in the previous decades. And that situation might worsen.

Some states are considering rolling back their composting initiatives which would allow yard waste to again go into landfills. Much of this has to do with the privatization of landfills — more trash going in means more profits for those private interests — and the generation of methane from landfill waste. Now that may seem like a good idea, and it is. But not when it encourages the amount of material that goes into landfills. [Michigan](#) and [Georgia](#) are among the states that have already considered reversing their bans on yard wastes in landfills. The more pressure generated by private landfill and methane producing interests, the more likely it is that we'll see the return of an old problem: yard waste filling landfills at an unsustainable rate.

Here's [a detailed look, from the US Composting Council](#) (PDF), of all the reasons we need to keep leaves and other yard wastes out of our landfills.

We haven't always championed the use of [commercial compost](#), despite the good it does. There's a history of municipalities producing their own yard waste compost that, because of the widespread use of herbicides and pesticides on our lawns and landscapes, contain compounds that might do more harm than good. Many of these problems are now monitored and have been

abated. But we've always thought the best solution to these potential problems is to take matters into your own hands. [Make your own compost and leaf mold](#) from your own yard wastes.

Leaves — high in carbon and trace elements — are a great ingredient to add to any composting effort. And turning them into leaf mold yields a different valuable amendment, full of the living microbes that keep soils healthy. Two pound box converts 500-750 lbs. of yard waste into mulch.

Click here to watch “How to Choose a Composter”:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WtpPcweMV5U>

But care must be taken when composting leaves. Leaves are mostly carbon. To make finished, well-balanced compost of them requires [adding green or nitrogen-rich material](#). That can come from grass clippings, which can be hard to come by this time of year. Or maybe you've saved them up through the summer and they're already on their way to breaking down. Adding sources of nitrogen, like stable cleanings or other manure-containing waste is a good idea. Or you can just add nitrogen heavy additives like alfalfa or blood meal in the spring to boost nitrogen levels and stimulate the composting process.

You don't have to compost leaves in a pile to keep them from the landfill. Run a mower over them a time or three and let them settle into your yard. They'll help keep your soil friable and discourage problems that come from hard and nutrition starved yards. (Shredding leaves is also a good idea for those going into your compost heap). Leaves are also good used as winter mulches, especially around acid-loving plants like azaleas and rhododendrons. Spreading a little lime among you leaf mulches will help keep pH levels perfect around your other perennials. The important thing? Don't let your leaves go to waste.
