

### A Snarky Horticulturalist Plea: Leave the Leaves Please!

Each fall as trees become bare and landscapes begin their long winter slumber, I start to observe a disturbing seasonal trend. Big brown bags that look like colossal fluffy pillows, sit on the curbside awaiting their ignominious trip to the landfill. Each sighting leaves me perturbed and more than mildly-irritated. I drive past in quiet condemnation, all the while wishing I could muster up the bravado to knock on the homeowner's door and give them a brief lecture about why this is such an absurd practice. Ultimately, for the purpose of self-preservation, I just keep driving.



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I often ponder what compels a person to carry out this act of leaf disposal atrocity. More importantly, I try to imagine what these people must be like in real life. The conclusion I finally arrive at is always the same. These brown baggers must be the same folks that file their taxes in February, maintain immaculately clean refrigerators, regularly dust on top of their kitchen cabinets and sweep under the couch, and have a labeled file folder full of product warranties for every item they have purchased since 1997. The mere sight of leaf litter is simply unbearable for this type of human. Come October 1st, they are standing under the oak tree in the front yard with their brown bag's mouth agape, ready to swallow the first fallen leaf of the season. Out of fear or ignorance, they work tirelessly to satisfy the baggy monster's insatiable appetite, ensuring that they never go hungry. Ultimately, they place the gluttonous bloated beasts on the curbside where they sit arrogantly for all to see, their ghastly leaf-consuming deed fulfilled.

If you happen to be one of the poor souls who has become ensnared by the apocryphal temptations of the big brown leaf bag, take heart. There is salvation in what I am about to share with you. Also, please don't take any of the above comments personally. I've become an increasingly judgmental and snarky horticulturalist, so we all have our shortcomings. Bad jokes aside, I am truly delighted that you are reading this article. These next paragraphs are an attempt to persuade you to abandon your natural tendencies toward sterility and perfection, and to start living life on the cluttered and slightly messy edge. It may awaken something deep inside you that has long been suppressed and carefully avoided, a botanical and spiritual awakening if you like. If this at all sounds enticing, I implore you to read on. If it all sounds a bit too naughty, then I suggest proceeding to the sports or lifestyle section.

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Now that I have wasted a third of my word allotment with this introduction, let me take what remains to educate, enlighten, and set you free from the tyranny and oppression of the brown bag. Simply put, the benefits of leaving leaves far outweighs the slight displeasure that their presence can illicit. Firstly, if left to their own devices, leaves will break down and enrich the soil. If you have flower beds or a barren corner, consider raking the leaves into these spots. Their decomposition results in a spongy compost that is light and fluffy, full of nutrients, and perfect for plant growth. The leaf litter will increase the number of beneficial soil microorganisms that are essential in breaking down organic material. Bacteria, fungi, and earthworms all help to decompose the leaf tissue, and this process slowly releases essential elements needed for plant growth such as nitrogen, phosphorus, and potassium. The composted soil that results from the leaf breakdown adds organic matter and increases soil fertility, texture, and drainage. Areas with heavily compacted clay soils can be dramatically improved over time simply by composting leaves on top of these sites.

Other key benefits include weed suppression and moisture retention. Moisture in the soil will be retained under the leaf layer while also making it harder for weeds to grow through the thick, dense mat of leaf litter. While this layer may be rather thick upon first raking, by the time the birds of spring are chirping, decomposition will be fast underway and the pile will have settled nicely. For the last seven seasons, I have done this in my own yard. Areas that were once bereft of life are now filled with spongy rich soil and a plethora of new plant life. I practice what I preach, and the transformation has been remarkable to observe.

If the gift of soil wasn't sufficient to elicit life changes and personal growth, then let me try another approach. The benefits that leaf litter provide to nature are boundless. Leaves provide an insulated natural habitat to countless species of insects, reptiles, amphibians, and small mammals. This winter oasis is crucial for many insect species such as butterflies, moths, fireflies, beetles, native bees, and spiders. Butterflies utilize leaf litter to overwinter as adults, larvae, or pupae, perfectly camouflaged and insulated from lethal freezing temperatures. Some of these species include the mourning cloak (*Nymphalis antiopa*), question mark (*Polygonia interrogationis*), eastern comma (*Polygonia comma*), red admiral (*Vanessa atalanta*), variegated fritillary (*Euptoieta claudia*), and common buckeye (*Junonia coenia*). Just do a simple google search of these on a dreary winter day and you will be rewarded with a visual entomological treat.

Sustaining butterfly and moth species also plays a crucial role in supporting birds who rely on caterpillars as a food source. Studies have shown that chickadees alone need between 350-570 caterpillars per day to feed newly hatched chicks. By the time they fledge, they will have consumed somewhere between 6000-9000 caterpillars. Reflect on the fact that this is the dietary requirements for a single chickadee clutch. Now do the math and consider what it must take to support a diversity of birds and their offspring. Simply leaving leaves can have a tremendous trickle-down effect on backyard ecosystems.

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Due to the leaf litter's excellent insulation quality against cold weather, it also serves as a refuge for a host of other backyard wildlife. Reptiles and amphibians such as frogs, toads, salamanders, turtles, and lizards all burrow into the leaves to stay warm and the moisture layer keeps them from dehydration. Mammals such as chipmunks, squirrels, and rabbits also rely on leaf litter to provide them with warm winter nesting sites and places to forage for valuable fatty food resources such as grubs, seeds, and nuts.

If I was a better writer and able to articulate myself with far less wordage, I could have provided you with at least another article's worth of info about the many benefits of leaving leaves. The simple leaf can play such an important role in backyard ecosystems by creating life-giving soil, providing winter refuge and forage, and sustaining a diversity of wildlife. My sincere hope is that this article, in some small way, encourages you to let go of your inhibitions and to start living life on the messy edge. Let those refrigerator shelves get a bit sticky, toss those warranties in the kitchen junk drawer, or if need be, start a kitchen junk drawer. You will feel a new sense of excitement, exhilaration, and cosmic bliss. Let the brown bagged beasts taste the flame of a fall bonfire and leave your old ways behind. Nature will be happier and so will you. Leave the leaves and rest easy my friends, you will have done good!

Here's to happy gardening and transformational living!

For questions or comments, please feel free to reach me at the UT/TSU Rutherford County Extension office. Our main office line is 615-898-7710 and my email is [jski@utk.edu](mailto:jski@utk.edu). Additionally, please check us out on the web at [rutherford.tennessee.edu](http://rutherford.tennessee.edu) to learn more about upcoming classes and all other Extension programming activities that we offer.



(Nature's gift, leaves. Photo J. Stefanski)