

Don't Let Leaves Litter Lake

Wherever leaves fall, they decompose and restock the soil with nutrients and organic matter. But when there is no soil to land on – such as on a street or sidewalk – the leaves and all their decomposing bits wash down the street and into the storm drain. From there they go directly into lakes and rivers where the nutrients will feed unwanted algae growth next summer. In addition to a major “ick” factor, this algae is a problem because when it dies and decomposes at the bottom of the lake, it uses up oxygen that fish and native plants need.

In the Mississippi River – Twin Cities watershed, 87 of the 180 lakes studied didn't meet water quality standards because of excess nutrients – that's about half the lakes! And leaves are a major source of the problem. Depending on the lake, leaves might account for 60% of the excess nutrients in these lakes.

Don't “leaf” is up to someone else to solve this problem! Here's what to do with your autumn leaves so that they nourish the soil and not unwanted algae.

Rake the leaves that have accumulated along your curb, sidewalk and alley

Several times during the fall, rake up the leaves that have accumulated along your curb and sidewalk. Street sweeping in late fall helps keep a lot of leaves from entering the water. You can help by raking 1-2 additional times. If you work with youth or community groups, consider organizing a community clean up for water quality. Never rake leaves into the street, even when you know the street sweeper is coming.

Never trash or burn your leaves

Don't add leaves to the regular trash (it's illegal) and don't burn them. Burning leaves releases large amounts of air pollution. These pollutants can cause breathing problems for sensitive groups and lead to long-term health effects for all of us.

Put leaves in your backyard compost pile

One of the best ways to use leaves (from the street or the yard) is to compost them in your backyard. Learn how to compost in your backyard.

Tip: If your bin isn't big enough to accommodate all your leaves, put early and late season leaves in the bin, then on your main raking weekend bring the rest to a compost or yard waste disposal with your waste hauler. If you have room, also bag up and store some dry leaves to use as a carbon source (“browns”) in your compost pile during the coming year.

Use leaves as mulch for your garden and lawn

Whole or shredded leaves can be used as mulch. Mulch benefits the soil and reduces weeds. On the lawn, use a mower to break apart the leaves so that they fall between the blades of grass. Don't let the leaf layer get too thick! In garden beds, leaves provide a protective layer of insulation for perennial gardens and shrubbery, either bagged or loose.

Consider curbside pick-up if you want a convenient option

Your garbage hauler will separately collect yard waste for an additional fee and then bring it to a commercial compost site. Contact your garbage hauler to learn about your pick-up options.

Please be aware that all Hennepin County residents who bag their yard waste are required to put their waste out for pickup in compostable bags – either paper bags or compostable plastic bags.