NEWSLETTER

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Ideas for Protecting our Lakes and Watershed

Fall Focus: Recycle Leaves the Right Way

14 Mile Watershed Friends and Supporters,

While it may be tempting to blow fallen leaves into the lake, this practice actually leads to future algae growth. When fall leaves wash into our lakes, they contribute excess nutrients that can lead to unpleasant algae growth and harm wildlife the following summer. There are other ways to deal with the leaves that will be friendlier to our lakes' water quality.

Mulch leaves on your lawn: This provides valuable nutrients for our lawns and saves us trips to the yard waste drop off sites. It turns out that mulching leaves back into your lawn is also good for our lawns and reduces the time we spend raking in the fall. It is important that you use your mower to mulch leaves into your lawn. Mowers cut leaves into small pieces, allowing them to fall into and beneath the grass canopy instead of resting upon it. This process results in increased surface area, which in turn makes it easier for insects and microbes to consume the leaves and get the nutrients back into the soil.

There have been several long-term studies of the effects of leaving leaves on the turf. These studies all conclude that your lawn will benefit from mulching leaves right into the grass. Lawns where leaves were mulched directly into the turf were healthier than the lawns with no leaves added and had fewer weeds. Leaf mulching also provides a softer surface in the following summer providing a cushion that would be more forgiving for persons engaging in physical activity in the area.

Compost leaves and leftover yard waste: Composting is another great way to repurpose leaves and other yard waste. Composting is something we can do to help nature recycle valuable nutrients back into the soil. It is a method of simply managing the natural decomposition process and can be accomplished by simply making a pile and letting it sit . . . or, actively turning the ingredients in the pile from time to time to speed up the process. When completed, it is considered to be "black gold" and can be added to your lawn, trees and shrubs or your garden. This soil

amendment provides benefits such as better water retention and enhancing the soil nutrition so that your plants grow better and are less susceptible to droughts.

Our sandy soils here in Rome are naturally very low in nutrients and do not retain water well (rain/water runs right through the sand). But compost added to sandy soil acts like millions of tiny little sponges holding onto the water, increasing its moisture holding capabilities as well as increasing the nutritive value.

Some popular methods of composting leaves include using a grass trimmer in a large garbage can to thrash the leaves, cutting them into smaller pieces. This will increase the surface area for microbes and organisms to penetrate the leaves and speed up the decomposition process. Another alternative is to use your lawn mower to mulch the leaves. If a bagger is available, bag the mulched leaves so they can be mixed over time into your compost bin or pile with other materials.

How to Make Leaf Compost: *When you compost leaves you should be sure to add some nitrogen rich material to the pile to help the leaves (which are high in carbon) break down. Grass clippings are an excellent source of nitrogen as are fruit and vegetable scraps. You can also speed up the composting process by chopping up your leaves with a lawn mower or garden chipper.*

Veteran composters like to keep a few bags of leaves from the fall to add to their compost piles throughout the year. Leaves keep well in plastic bags and it is a great way to get more compost from your bin.

How to Make Leaf Mulch: *Leaves can also be used to make great mulch and/or serve as a winter ground cover for gardens and around shrubs and trees. And, they are free. Shred your leaves and pile them on top of your annual garden or around perennial plants and shrubs. This will help insulate plants and protect them from winter freeze damage. Since large leaves get wet and mat down, they provide poor insulation -- it is important that you shred your leaves first. The best way to do that is to run over them with your lawn mower or use a leaf shredder.*

Fall Leaves are a valuable resource and can be a benefit to your property. If you don't want to try these methods, gather the leaves and take them to the Rome Transfer Site where they will be used to make the community compost.

Please, do not blow the leaves into the lake – we all want improved water quality in the future.

The 14 Mile Watershed Alliance is a nonprofit organization dedicated to the improvement of surface and groundwater in the 14 Mile Creek Watershed. See us at 14milewatershed.org and https://www.facebook.com/14MileWatershed

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