

Decisions, Decisions!

It's a wet February afternoon as I stand here looking out the living room window and wonder if I did the right thing last fall. The leaves lie two inches deep in the front yard, disturbed only by wind, snow, rain, and ice. You see, for the first time ever, I did not rake them into fluffy piles. Instead, the discovery that butterflies and moths use leaves and leaf litter for winter protection convinced me to break the time-honored ritual of moving my leaf cover.

After reading an online blog article from the Xerces Society entitled "Leaves are not Litter," I was open to an experiment. The question was how I would know if the eggs, chrysalises, and adult butterflies that do not migrate were already under my oak leaves. Additionally, I've learned that what looks like oak leaves may actually be the chrysalises and cocoons of swallowtails disguised as leaves. But I'll have to wait until the weather warms up to get my answer.

Another news bomb was the connection between bumblebee queens hibernating in shallow burrows and the leaves that hide them, the same leaves that provide shelter for spiders, snails, worms, and beetles-- all part of the food web that supports chipmunks and other small animals. Who knew?

The article does concede that deep leaf cover can damage turf grass and advises homeowners who love their lawns cleared to rake whole leaves into beds or under trees rather than shredding them so as to render eggs and caterpillars intact.

Ultimately, author Justin Wheeler leaves us with this thought: "Simply put, when we treat leaves like trash, we're tossing out the beautiful moths and butterflies that we'll surely miss and work so hard to attract." (Xerces Society blog entry, October 6, 2017)

Now, if you are still reading, take note! A University of Missouri article offers homeowners an opposing view of leaf cover on turf. According to David Trinklein (trinkleind@missouri.edu, November 9, 2015), removing leaves is essential to turf grass survival. Leaves block sunlight, thus reducing plant food production, and they also trap moisture, which promotes disease.

Trinklein suggests three ways of repurposing leaves to provide food for turf and plants. One is mowing leaves in a crisscross method and double mowing to create leaf confetti, which will sink into the turf and decompose. This will foster "the release of nutrients for use by the turf grass."

Another method is creating a compost pile at least 25 square feet in area. A nitrogen source combined with the carbon found in leaves will produce usable compost, provided the temperature inside the pile hits 110-140 degrees Fahrenheit and the pile is turned every few weeks.

Yet another use for leaves is mulching for shrubs in beds. Oak leaves that remain stiff are ideal because they do not mat or flatten when wet. He advises using wire cylinders around shrubs and plants lest stray leaves escape.

There is an alternative to the ritual steps of achieving the perfect lawn that we all know require overseeding, fertilizing, aerating, then fertilizing and over seeding again, risking fertilizer runoff into storm drains. The challenge of deciding to remove leaves from lawns or let them blanket the yard in winter causes all of us to reexamine our roles as master gardeners. Do we support large expanses of turf grass

because that's what we've always done, or do we support the wildlife and pollinators that support us and give us so much in return? The decision is yours, but I'm willing to take the chance that I will see some beauty emerge from underneath the brown blanket in my yard when warm weather arrives. I can't wait!

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