

Shred Your Autumn Leaves Before Composting



Leaves make a wonderful mulch to enrich your soil. Leaves are nitrogen poor, but rich in minerals, so most kinds are a good addition to the compost pile. However, some leaves, including oak, are especially slow to break down.

Fallen leaves will break down much more quickly if they are chopped into smaller pieces before being added to the composter. An easy way to shred leaves into smaller pieces, even if you don't have a chipper-shredder, is to run over them with a mulching lawn mower with a collecting bag if you have a big enough bag. Or shred them, then rake them up. Adding a nitrogen source such as Ammonium Sulphate to the pile will greatly increase the composting speed.

If you have a lot of leaves, store your shredded leaves in garbage bags or cans. Shredded leaves have many uses in the yard and garden. Layer shredded leaves into your compost pile to add air and a carbon source to the pile. This is especially handy in the winter, as compost tends to get matted down and suffer from a shortage of bulk "brown" materials.

Place shredded leaves in your flowerbeds as mulch where they will breakdown slowly and reduce weed infestation. They also do a great job of building organic matter in the soil and protecting flower bulbs and perennials from hard winter freezes.

Don't wait for autumn rains to do this easy task. Raking, shredding or grinding up dry leaves is much easier than working with sodden matted ones. Do not add walnut leaves to a compost pile, as they contain material that affects the growth of certain other plants. Pine needles may also be composted, but should not exceed 30% of the compost volume.

This article adapted from Cooperative State Research, Education and Extension Service, USDA. Please contact Ken Churches at cdcalaveras@ucdavis.edu or (209) 754-6475 with your agricultural questions. To speak with a Certified Master Gardener: Calaveras (209) 754-2880, Tuolumne (209) 533-5696, Amador (209) 223-6837, El Dorado (530) 621-5543.