

Where should leaves go after they fall?

With the extraordinary beauty of autumn comes the less than ordinary task of dealing with leaves. Back in the old days, burning was the method of choice. But we now know that in addition to producing greenhouse gases such as carbon dioxide, burning leaves is a health hazard.

Leaf smoke produces particulate matter, which can reach into the deepest regions of the lungs and remain there for months or even years. It increases the chances of respiratory infection, reduces lung capacity, and triggers asthma attacks.

Leaf burning produces cancer-causing dioxins and hydrocarbons. Its incomplete combustion generates carbon monoxide, which is especially harmful to populations such as unborn children, newborns, and the elderly.

Michigan law prohibits leaf burning in populations over 7,500, and many townships have enacted their own ordinances to ban it.

Well, if we shouldn't burn leaves, and it is illegal to put them in the landfill, then what?

They can be set out in yard waste bags to be picked up for the municipal composting, but this process is costly to taxpayers.

The easiest and most direct path for leaves to return to the earth is by mowing over them after they fall to the ground. Mowing shreds them up so they decompose fast, adding nutrients to your lawn. Shredded leaves can be used as a mulch under trees and bushes, and on garden beds.

Or rake leaves into a pile in a corner of the yard, where they will decompose in a year or less, into a humus that can be used as a natural fertilizer and soil conditioner.

To speed up the process, use a compost bin. The Washtenaw County Service Center on Zeeb Road has bins made from recycled plastic, available for only \$7 a piece. The bins are lightweight, and set up within minutes without tools. Recycling bins with lids are available for \$40 at the Recycle Ann Arbor Drop-Off Station on Ellsworth Road.

Composting is easy to do—just follow the formula: one part “green” (i.e. grass clippings and vegetable scraps) to two parts “brown” (dry leaves and twigs). Keep the pile moist but not wet, and turn it occasionally. In a few weeks or months it will be ready! For more information on composting, please visit <http://recycle.ewashtenaw.org>.

Where should fallen leaves go? Let's help them take the short path, back to earth.