

After adorning our landscape with jeweled tones of gold, red and orange, our maple trees have pretty much given up their leaves for the year. It's like wearing all those colors is one last hurrah, going down in a blaze of glory. And now comes the raking.

We have oak trees too – big ones, with lots of leaves – and we'd be swimming in a sea of leaves by Thanksgiving if we didn't do something with them. Some people look at leaves as a nuisance. I see them as organic food for the lawn and the gardens. But there is a little bit of work involved to make the best use of them in this way.

If you've ever walked through the woods and stopped to dig around in the soil there, you know it only vaguely resembles that hard, sticky clay most of us have around our homes and in our gardens. That's because over years of the trees losing their leaves and them decomposing, they add to the enrichment and enhance the texture of the soil. Most of us are on a little shorter timetable than the woods though, so we may need to give Mother Nature a helping hand when it comes to our own immediate environment.

If you're fortunate enough to have willows or other trees with small leaves, you can just let the leaves fall where they may and all is well. But if you have oaks and maples like we do, those larger leaves can create a smothering blanket that can cause fungus and rot by the time spring rolls around. So we chop ours up with the mower, using some of them as mulch, and putting the excess in the compost bin. There they will decompose more rapidly and be ready to use in the garden by spring.

I don't rake all the leaves away from the flower beds and from around the shrubs, because they can help insulate the plants from winter's wretchedness. Take the roses, for example. Their thorny canes snag dry leaves and in a short time, they're wearing them like a muffler. Cozy!

But smaller perennials that lose some or all of the upper parts of their being during winter can get smothered as the leaves mat together. As you no doubt notice in spring, those leaves just don't decompose over the course of a winter. And in fall, they actually prevent rain and supplemental watering from getting to the soil and down to the plant's roots, where it's needed. That's not good, because plants need to be well hydrated as they go into winter to help them

survive.

So we rake some and chop some and spread some and compost some. What about burning, you ask? Well, we've been known to burn a few in our time; who doesn't love the smell of burning leaves in the fall? But ever since gardening became a way of life at our house, we do very little of that. First of all, there are laws concerning open burning and secondly, burning leaves emits toxins that aren't healthy to breathe.

Yeah, I know. If it's not one thing, it's another. But leaves really do give off harmful gases and the smoke contains small particles that can be especially irritating to those with breathing issues, such as asthma. Those particles can remain in the lungs for a long time. The hydrocarbon gases produced by burning leaves contain known carcinogens and who wants to breathe those? Just because we've done it for years doesn't mean it's a good thing.

So consider carefully what you will do with your leaves this fall. Put them to work for you! They're free mulch and fertilizer for your gardens! Trees – they're the gift that just keeps on giving.

Read more at Kylee's blog, Our Little Acre, at www.ourlittleacre.com and on Facebook at www.facebook.com/OurLittleAcre. Contact her at PauldingProgressGardener@gmail.com.