

Bell County Master Gardeners'
Tip of the Week
By G. C. Okeson, Master Composter.
"Composting Live Oak Leaves"

Although right now the cold winds of winter are blowing outside, it won't be long until spring is upon us. This means that the Live Oak trees will be shedding their leaves in preparation for another year, leaving us "knee deep" in those seemingly indestructible leaves.

The question always arises, "What should I do with them?" Most urbanites rake them, bag them, and have them hauled to the landfill. This is exactly what you should NOT do! Everyone should have a compost bin in their back yard so that they can turn these dead leaves into new, fertile soil.

At this point, you probably have a frown on your face as you retort, "I've tried that before, but Live Oak leaves just refuse to compost. Instead of decomposing, they just lie there and stare at you."

Live Oak leaves can be composted if you follow just 4 important rules:

First, you need to have a compost bin that holds at least one cubic yard of leaves. It takes at least this volume of material to generate enough heat to accelerate the decomposition process. The pile should be about 70% oak leaves and 30% green materials (fresh leaves or grass clippings), or kitchen scraps. If you don't have enough green material to make a pile, consider adding a small amount of nitrogen fertilizer, like ammonium sulfate, to the mix. The green and brown materials should be added to the bin in alternating layers – first brown, then green, then brown – and so on.

Second, the leaves should be chopped up into smaller pieces, the smaller the better. Some prefer to do this by running a lawnmower over the leaf pile before it is placed in the compost bin. I personally prefer using an electric lawn vacuum like the one pictured. It shreds the leaves enough that they can rapidly decay. In addition, it sucks them up and bags them, saving my back for other chores.

Third, keep the pile moist – not wet, but moist. It should be kept about the consistency of a moist sponge, not dripping.

Finally, the pile needs to be turned periodically. If you have a compost thermometer, turn or mix the pile right after the peak temperature (usually above 120 degrees) has passed. Repeat this a total of 3 times. If you do not have a compost thermometer, then turn the pile at 2-3 week intervals. The process should be completed in 9 weeks, at which time you should have produced several cubic feet of rich black loam. Good luck and good gardening!

Have any questions about gardening in Central Texas? Contact ask.bcmga@gmail.com

Plan to attend the Bell County Master Gardeners' spring plant sale on Sat. March 24, 8:00 AM to 1PM.

