

Should I Rake Leaves or Not?

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That is a good question. There are several theories going around regarding the need to rake or not to rake the leaves which have fallen since winter arrived or at least what winter you could say we have had so far. At least the deciduous trees have dropped their leaves and they are all over your yard and you want to get out and clean them up to make your yard look better. I am going to present two different theories whether to rake or not to rake and let you make your own decision.

Trees lose their leaves in the fall/winter as a survival method, meaning the tree can conserve water and energy and make it thru the winter. Thus, going dormant.

Reasons why not to rake leaves:

Raking leaves and bagging them or even putting them in compost piles destroys the homes of many small creatures that rely on the cover of the leaves in the winter. By working with nature and the ecosystem, you are being a steward of the land, and also improving the lawn. You will have healthier beneficial insect and animal populations in the spring which will improve your gardens, woodlots, ponds, etc.

Some such critters that can be found in leaf litter in the winter are:

- Box Turtles
- Salamanders and other amphibians
- Snakes
- Spiders and other arachnids
- Snails and slugs
- Millipedes and centipedes
- Beetles and other insects
- Moths and butterfly pupae
- Worms and other soil aerators
- Soil-improving microorganisms
- Important fungus and healthy bacteria

Healthy insect populations that rely on leaf litter in winter will also feed birds and predatory insects. The no-rake method will act as a natural fertilizer, improving your soils and also suppressing weeds and saving you time, effort and the cost of bagging.

What to do instead of raking:

- Rake up leaves and move to the outskirts of your lawn where it does not bother you.
- Rake leaves and put them over your garden beds for protection
- Mulch leaves with your mower
- Rake leaves and put around trees as mulch

Reasons Why to Rake Leaves:

There is a good reason behind raking leaves that has to do with lawn health besides giving your lawn a nice tidy look. You probably heard the flowing warnings in the past about allowing leaves not to stay on top of your grass:

- The lawns, too, have to breathe.
- The lawn will be smothered in a thick layer of un-shredded leaves if left on top of them all winter
- That such a layer can invite pests and diseases and can cause serious problems like brown patch.
- That such a layer forms a barrier that blocks water, nutrients and a healthy air flow from getting down to the root system of your grass.
- If the leaves are matted down, they can keep new grass blades from emerging next spring.

So, when should I rake leaves? First, don't use your rake, use your lawn mower on the mulch setting. You should have already been doing some mulching mowing since fall but if you have not then go ahead and start now with your blades set high to lightly mulch the leaves. Then in a couple of weeks, lower the blades some and mulch again. As you are doing this you are providing food for those little critters that I listed above. Most of all, please do not use a blower as you end up blowing the leaves, the critters, and also robs the soil of nature's greatest resource – rich, natural compost from decomposing leaf litter. In addition, you have the noise of the blower and fuel usage.

So, To Rake or Not to Rake is the Question? Basically, in my research, what I found was we should be mulching mowing the leaves and letting them go right back into the grass and soil for the critters to take advantage of. You don't want to let large leaves such as Maple, Oak, Sweetgum completely cover your grass as it could lead to potential problems, such as brown patch. I hope this helps you decide whether to rake or not, it has helped me.

If you have any questions, please contact our Hot Line at 409 882-7010 Tuesday and Thursday 10 – 2 or visit Facebook Orange County Texas Master Gardeners. Our website is <https://txmg.org/orange>. We meet the 2nd Thursday of each month 6PM at the Orange County EXPO Center, 11475 FM 1442, Orangefield. Everyone is invited. Our next Master Gardener Certification class starts April 2. Contact us thru Facebook or our website for more information.