

THE GARDEN SPOT

by Kate Rogers Gessert



Leaf Mulch

Winter mulching is important in our climate; long winter rains can leach nutrients out of the soil, and wash away the soil itself, unless it is covered. Winter cover crops are one way of covering it; another way is mulch. You may have plenty of leaves in your own yard to use for mulch. There are some leaves that you should put in the garbage instead of using them for compost or mulch. These include leaves (and other parts) of plants that are diseased, leaves and windfall fruits from apple trees, in which apple scab can winter over, and leaves of black walnut trees, which contain juglone, a substance which inhibits the growth of many plants.

If you would like extra leaves for garden mulch and compost, there's an excellent free resource available locally. The Eugene City Maintenance Division collects leaves that some gardeners pile in the street, and delivers them to other gardeners who can use them.

You can ask for leaves by completing a delivery request form, available at the leaf program's headquarters—Eugene Public Works Maintenance Division, 1820 Roosevelt Boulevard—at the city's Permit and Information Center, 244 East Broadway, or at community centers throughout the city. If you prefer to get leaves on impulse, you can wait until you see leaf pick-up going on in your neighborhood, run out and ask the leaf-truck driver for a request form, fill it out on the spot, and have your driveway full of leaves, all within a matter of minutes. The disadvantage to this method, of course, is that if you don't notice the leaf pick-up crew coming through your neighborhood, you won't have any leaves.

Leaves are no longer picked up after January 3, so your request should be in at least several weeks before that to make sure you get leaves. Occasionally leaf requests can't be filled, usually because there isn't room for the dump truck that carries the leaves to unload. If you have low-hanging trees or wires, or an alley where a dump truck can't swing around to get in unloading position, see if you can convince a neighbor with a big driveway to share the leaves and let you use their place to unload.

You can make specific requests about the leaves. You can get either a regular or large dump truck load. The regular is about 7 cubic yards of leaves; the large is about 12. You can ask for leaves from lightly-travelled streets, so that you will not be adding lead to your soil along with the leaves. I strongly recommend you do this; whether you are going to be using the leaves around food plants or ornamentals or both, there's no point in adding extra lead to any soil. You can also ask that black walnut leaves and oak leaves not be included in your leaves. Large quantities of oak leaves may acidify the soil, and most local soils are already acid enough.

Some people feel uncomfortable about setting specific conditions on the leaves that are delivered to them, but it really is okay! I have checked all of this out with the head of the leaf program, and he says it's fine to make these specific requests.

Using the Leaves

What do you do with all these leaves once you get them? You can put some in your compost pile, and use others to mulch your garden. I use them very heavily (a 9-inch layer) in a woodland garden, and the native wildflowers and shrubs that grow there are thriving. Spreading their roots through a heavy layer of leaf litter on top of the soil, and having lots of leaves mixed in with the soil, too, approximates the conditions of their native forests.

I mulch my vegetable beds with leaves as well, and in the spring I add organic fertilizers to the partly decomposed leaves, with extra nitrogen to

aid in leaf decomposition, and turn everything into the soil. Heavy use of winter mulch in my garden has cut down tremendously on weeds; there are now very few. (If there are areas of your garden where you want wildflowers or other plants to reseed, don't use mulch there.)

I have been mulching perennial flowers with a 6-inch leaf layer, but I have read recently that it's better to mulch them with a lighter-textured mulch that air can get through, and that new sprouts can push their way through in the spring. During winter rains, leaves tend to mat down into a fairly solid layer, but straw, for example, is light. Make sure to use straw rather than hay, because hay is full of grass seeds.

One important reason to mulch perennials in winter is to keep the soil cold. Without mulch, the soil around perennials' roots alternately freezes and thaws, especially with our fluctuating winter temperatures, and as the water inside the plants' roots repeatedly expands and contracts, the roots are literally ripped apart. A winter mulch prevents this. It should be put on in the next month or so, and left there until after all possibility of frozen soil is past. April is a safe time to take it off.

My favorite use of last year's leaves was the creation of a "leaf lawn." I had decided I had to replace the scruffy lawn in our backyard, so last fall I covered it with 6 inches of leaves, to kill off the old grass before I planted new grass. In the winter, a vast, lumpy sea of leaves extended down our backyard. By spring, the leaves had settled into a flat 2-inch layer; occasional wisps of grass and stalwart dandelions emerged, but by and large, the lawn had vanished. After I raked the twigs and seeds off the surface of the dense leaf layer, I was left with a smooth, dark brown surface, comfortable to walk on, and definitely low-maintenance. I think I may stay with the leaf lawn, and not bother with grass at all!

Putting the Garden to Rest

In addition to mulching, there are a few other garden jobs that it's good to attend to now. Then you can enjoy winter in peace, knowing that your plants are all tucked in and safe.

If you still have bulbs to plant, plant them now! If this cold weather continues, the soil will soon freeze, and then digging will be impossible, and your bulbs will be homeless.

Cutting back dead stalks of plants keeps the garden not only tidy-looking but healthy. However, leave the lower stalks of perennials to let you know where they are, so if you are digging near them in the spring, you won't dig them up by mistake. This is especially important with perennials that are late to sprout: balloon flower, for example.

If you will be harvesting vegetables and herbs during the winter, make sure now that you have paths to give you relatively dry, easy access to the plants you'll be harvesting.

Then you can sit back and enjoy yourself! There is lots to love in the garden at this season. The juncos are back, the cedar waxwings are working their way through town, and many other familiar and unusual birds are harvesting berries from fall bushes. Now that many trees have lost their leaves, one can see more easily their towering, twisted, or spreading branches, the peeling or smooth or furrowed texture of their bark, and their variously shaped buds, promises of next year's leaves and flowers.

[Kate Rogers Gessert's book, The Beautiful Food Garden, is going out of print. She has bought the remaining copies back from her publisher, and will be selling them at Saturday Market on non-rainy Saturdays during December for \$6 to \$10 on a sliding scale (originally \$24.95). Come and get a book while they last, or buy several for holiday gifts!]

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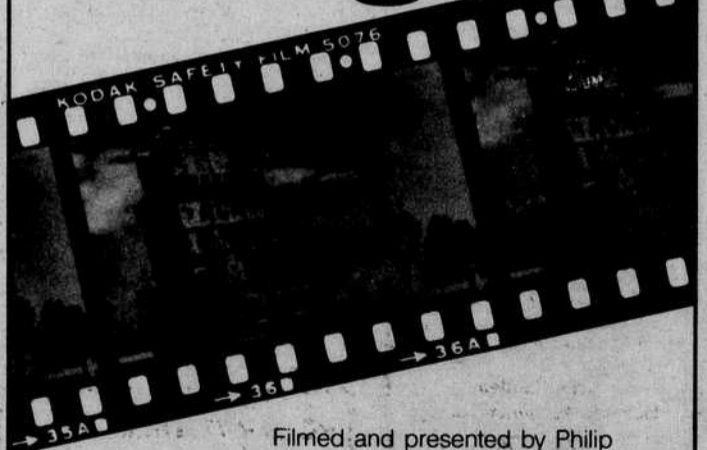
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