

## Why Is Leaf Management Important for Our Community & Our Environment?

*Traditionally, many Princeton homeowners have piled leaves at the curb for fall pickup by the municipality, but this practice has many downsides for the community and its environment.*

*By implementing these easy, creative solutions, we can enrich our soil, prevent water pollution, and become an even greener community.*

**Created by  
The Princeton  
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## Princeton's Guide To Fall Leaf Management



## Problems With Piling Leaves on the Curb for Pickup

**Safety:** Leaves on the street force cars out across the center line, attract children and can cause fires when hot mufflers or catalytic converters touch dry leaves. Where there are no sidewalks, pedestrians and bicyclists are forced towards the center of the street. Street flooding when storm drains get blocked adds to these problems.

**Increased Flooding:** The annual mass removal of leaves from the urban landscape reduces organic matter in urban soils. This decreases the soils' permeability, which increases flooding in local streams.

**Water Pollution:** Appearances are deceiving. The streets we walk on, drive on and dump yard waste onto are essentially dry creek beds, directly linked to Princeton's streams. Though leaves are supposed to be piled on the curb rather than on the pavement, many leaves nevertheless end up on the street. These get rained on, start to decompose, and then release nutrient pollution into waterways before the leaves can be picked up.

**Energy consumption:** Piling leaves on the curb for pickup triggers a highly mechanized chain of events. The leaves must be hauled out of town, ground up, windrowed by heavy machinery, and then hauled back into town for use in landscaping. If homeowners instead use or compost their own leaves in their yards, we can reduce greenhouse gas emissions and fight global warming.

**Tree health:** It is hard to imagine a happier tree root than one infiltrating the rich leaf mold on the underside of a leaf pile.

**Expense and diversion of staff from other municipal services:** Leaf collection increases wear and tear on town vehicles and draws town crews away from other services they would otherwise provide year-round.

**General awkwardness:** Since NJ state law forbids piling leaves on streets, it is very difficult to pile leaves correctly without having them block the sidewalks or kill grass.



## Ways to Use Leaves In Your Yard

**There are lots of reasons to think of leaves as an asset rather than a burden.**

**These simple procedures will benefit your soil and plants, reduce fuel use and keep our air cleaner:**

1. The simplest thing to do is **rake or blow leaves into a woodlot**, if available.
2. **Mulch leaves with a mower** so they can disappear back into the lawn. The fragmented leaves can also be raked onto flower beds as a mulch—a technique particularly appropriate for owners of small lots. Some leaves, like those of silver maples, crinkle up and all but disappear into the lawn on their own, even before mowing. For thick, persistent leaves like those from a red oak, a corral or the mulch mower approach will keep them from blowing back into the yard. Though a mower with a mulching blade would be optimal, all power mowers should do an adequate job.
3. **Spread leaves on your garden** and leave them there to hold in moisture, suppress weeds, keep the soil cool in the summer, and slowly release nutrients. Planting tomatoes, for instance, requires nothing more than parting the leaves to put the new plants in. The leaf mulch reduces rotting of any tomatoes that touch the ground.

4. **Rake leaves into a pile.** A corral or circle of wire fencing will help contain the leaves and keep them from blowing around. A readily available fencing is 3 feet high, green, and comes in rolls at the local hardware store. (Photo below shows enough fencing for several corrals). The corral is essentially invisible when tucked in a back corner of the lot. A U-shape may be preferred so that leaves can be raked right into the enclosure rather than lifted over the fencing. The leaf pile quickly reduces in size over the winter. The leaves can be left to decompose, acting like a sponge to catch the rain, and releasing nutrients to benefit the health of all trees and other landscaping in the vicinity. Contrary to popular notions of composting, it is not necessary to laboriously turn the pile. Leaf piles do not create odors.



5. **Use leaves to control weeds** by raking them towards the fence line where they can serve as a mulch to keep down weeds that often dominate there. You can dump leaves on any other weeds or groundcovers that are getting out of control. A thick layer of leaves discourages weeds. For weeds or groundcovers strong enough to push up through the leaves, first place overlapping pieces of cardboard on the undesired plants, then use the leaves over top to hide the cardboard. Both will decompose over time.