LEAVE YOUR LEAVES

It may be spring, but leaves are falling. Live oaks and laurel oaks are shedding their old leaves and sprouting bright green new ones. The trees don't need them any more -- but you do.

 Fallen leaves are an accumulation of nutrients. Use them to your advantage and recycle those nutrients back into the soil. Leave them in place where they fall, mulch them or turn them into rich compost to improve our sandy soil.

 One way to make easy use of the leaves is to let them fall under the trees into large self-mulching beds. It reduces mowing area and avoids the problem of growing grass in dense shade. The spouse or neighbors may call you "lazybones" but you are following University of Florida's Florida Yards and Neighborhoods recommendations for good gardening.

 Don't spend hours raking. Raking leaves is a lot of work and should be a last resort! If leaves fall on the lawn, mow them to reduce the volume and recycle nutrients to our poor sandy soil. Several mowings will chip the leaves into fine pieces that decompose quickly and don't harm lawns.

 If your trees drop too many leaves in one area, consider using them elsewhere in the yard for free mulch. Many gardeners don't have the luxury and spend dollars and time buying and spreading expensive cypress mulch.

 If you have more mulch than you can use, start a compost pile. It is a misconception that compost attracts varmints so don't let that discourage you from composting. Shredded leaves compost more quickly so mow them before bagging or raking to add to the compost pile. Sprinkle with a little water and fertilizer and by next spring, you will have good compost to add to planting beds and vegetable gardens.

 Maybe your neighborhood has an area that you can pile leaves and let them rot. If you have leaves that you don't want, don't throw them away and waste natural fertilizer and soil improvement potential. Instead, contact your local school to see if they have a gardening project or landscape that would benefit. Offer them to friends and neighbors who may gladly haul off your piles of bagged leaves. Call us or send an E-mail message to our Osceola County Master Gardeners epabon5@ufl.edu. We will list you as a leaf source on our Web page at http://osceola.ifas.ufl.edu/oscmg.html if you give us permission in your message.

 If you want to take the easy way and establish self-mulching planting beds, be sure to select shrubs and ground cover plants that tolerate the shade. Plant farther than 3' to 5' from tree trunks to avoid damaging major roots and avoid trunk rot.

 When installing plants around mature trees, avoid disturbing tree roots as much as possible. Don’t till the soil under the spread of the branches. Most of the critical feeder roots are near the soil surface and cut roots often sprout new shoots that are hard to keep cut off.

 Look up at the tree limbs and note their size. Tree roots radiate out from the trunk in all directions in a similar branching pattern. Roots often extend up to three times the spread of the branches. Large roots that are close to the trunk should be the same size as the limbs you see above. If you cut a bigroot, you kill off a much larger portion of the small feeder roots and damage a major part of the tree's life support system.

 Some gardeners prefer to plant into small mounds of soil under the spread of large trees instead of digging through a tangle of tree roots. Decide where you want to plant your azaleas, caladiums, dwarf ginger or other shade loving plants around the tree. Break open bags of potting soil, topsoil or compost and plant directly into the pile. Be sure the soil is as deep as the depth of your potted plant's root system. Spread
leaves between the plants to give a level appearance throughout the bed. Plant roots will grow beyond the added soil as the plants mature.

Contact us by e-mail or call (321) 697-3000 for more information on recycling your leaves and yard debris and composting. This year, leave the leaves and save your soil.

County Fair

The Osceola County Fair is in full swing at the Agricultural Center this week. Master Gardeners have a booth inside the main exhibit building and are on hand at the demonstration gardens to answer your gardening questions. Bring your samples for plant identification or problem diagnosis. Call (321) 697-3000 for fair information.

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