

Leaves, a Rich Fall Treasure

As the autumn winds blow your leaves around in beautiful shades of red, yellow, green and brown, don't look at them as a pain, something to just get rid of – think of them as a rich treasure for next year's flowers, shrubs and gardens.

Leaves are rich in phosphorus and provide organic matter to the soil. So instead of raking them to the terrace or street consider running the lawn mower over them instead. If you don't have too many you can just leave the chopped leaves to enrich the lawn. If you have a lot, you can use the mower's bagger and add them to your compost pile. Whole leaves take FOREVER to break down for compost, so it is always best to chop them with a mower or use the reverse setting on your leaf blower. You'll have great compost come spring, if you mix grass clippings and chopped leaves with your kitchen waste.

No compost pile, just use the chopped leaves as mulch around your trees and shrubs or spread them in your garden. Whole leaves can be piled over wood mulch in your planting beds, but should never be used in areas with perennial flowers or spring bulbs, as they mat down when wet.

When leaves are piled for community pick-up they not only cost tax payer funds to collect, while waiting to be collected, they can blow into the street and be ground up by car tires. Either way, they are on the fast track to being washed down into the storm drains which lead directly to the Rock River. Once in the water, bacteria and insects further break them down, releasing rich phosphorus and using up vital oxygen.

Even when leaf piles are on the lawn, rain seeping through them creates a rich nutrient tea that too washes down into the storm drains.

Now phosphorus is an important plant nutrient and is a key ingredient in your yard's health, but when it washes into our Rock River Basin's streams and lakes it grows plants too. Way too many! No one wants to recreate in water that is scummy with algae or clogged with plants. We don't even want our dogs swimming in scummy water.

So remember what you do with your leaves matter, they can be a resource to your yard, or they can harm our local lakes and rivers.

If composting or mulching doesn't work for you remember in Watertown we require that leaves are left on the terrace for pick-up from October to December.

This message is part of the *Clean water. Bright future.* campaign of the Rock River Stormwater Group, of which the City of Watertown is a member. For more information about what we are doing to prevent stormwater pollution and other actions you can take, go to: <http://www.cleanwaterbrightfuture.org>.