

## **Tree Leaves in the Yard - What Do I Do?**

By Matt Fagerness, Turfgrass Specialist, Kansas State University

Yes, it's that wonderful time of year when our deciduous trees decide they've had it for the year and are dropping their leaves en masse, usually on our lawn areas. While not a lot of fun, removing leaves can be an important part of a fall lawn care program, especially if new turf was planted in early fall.



Fallen leaves are not an appreciable source of nutrients for turf and are not toxic. They can be a valuable source of organic matter, a benefit to soil quality. The problem with leaves is that they create shade. Cool-season turfgrass plants are now experiencing optimal growth conditions. Excessive shade from a layer of fallen tree leaves diminishes the chance for turf to take advantage of them. This is not to say that leaves need to be removed

immediately. But leaving a thick layer of leaves on a lawn for more than 3-4 days can reduce potential growth and, in extreme cases, cause turfgrass plants to lose some green color due to lack of sunlight. In that case, leaf removal will help turf bounce back fairly quickly. Young turf plants, with less than fully expanded leaf blades and immature root systems, are particularly sensitive to shade stress and leaves should be removed more frequently than from established turf.

Disposal of leaves can involve raking and bagging, composting or mulching back into the turf. Be sure to check with your local trash service or transfer station to make sure they'll take leaves. When raking leaves, be extra careful with new turf. Aggressive raking may pull young plants out of the ground. Composting can be effective but is facilitated if the leaves are tilled or mulched to break them up. Use of a mulching mower to return leaf material to the ground is not detrimental to established turf, provided the mulched leaves aren't so thick that the turf gets limited sunlight. Be more careful with mower mulching leaves on new turf as the seedlings are more sensitive to mechanical stress. Once you've mowed a new or renovated lawn at least once, mulching leaves with your rotary mower should not harm the turf. By keeping fallen leaves from hampering turfgrass growth, we can maximize the benefit of fall growth that we have the luxury of here in Kansas.

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