

Autumn Composting

With autumn upon us, many have begun fall clean up. When doing this, several things should be considered, such as when to clean up certain landscape plants, what to do with yard waste and whether to prune and fertilize trees and shrubs.

Many of us use annuals (plants that die at the end of the growing season) and herbaceous perennials (plants with leaves and stems that die to the ground but regenerate from roots in the spring) in our landscapes. Annuals can be completely removed at any time. Perennials should be left alone until the leaves have turned brown. These can then be cut away using sharp pruners or trimming shears.

Disposing of leaves and landscape waste can be challenging. If possible, compost leaves or place them approximately 4 inches deep on bare soil and incorporate them in. They decompose into the same products as commercial mulches and are free. Some gardeners have concerns about mixing walnut leaves into gardens due to the leaves possibly being able to inhibit germination of some seeds. I have not witnessed this, but if you are concerned, throw the leaves from these trees away.

Hauling leaves and landscape waste to Logan City's green waste facility is another excellent option. Generally, fees are not charged for drop off, and waste is recycled into compost and mulches that are sold back to the public at very reasonable rates. They accept most things including tree branches, grass clippings, dead plant material, weeds and leaves. Green facility employees do an excellent job, and I compliment them.

One of the most common questions I receive is how to improve soil. Many have a tendency to want to haul in top soil. I rarely recommend this because even if a quality top soil is delivered, it is sometimes not completely compatible with existing soil and the mix of existing and delivered soil can have drainage and other problems. Conversely, the fall season is the best time of year to incorporate compost or leaves into the soil, if needed. This gives soil microorganisms time to break compost down and usually allows any undesirable products such as excessive salt to leach away before spring gardening. As long as no more than 3 inches of compost are incorporated into the soil and the compost has had an appropriate amount of time to decompose, few, if any, problems will arise. However, if you have questions about particular compost or soil, the USU analytical lab can inexpensively perform basic quality testing. It is better to be safe than sorry.

As a final reminder, most trees and shrubs should not be pruned in the fall except for dead or diseased wood. Additionally no trees or shrubs should be fertilized in the fall. Both this and pruning can potentially cause inordinate amounts of winter damage. However, it is acceptable to apply fertilizer to the lawn if needed. For further information, refer to the factsheet "Winding Down for Winter" found at: http://extension.usu.edu/files/publications/publication/HG_Horticulture_2007-01pr.pdf.