Fall is winding down, and leaves are finally dropping from the trees. Traditionally, we rake them off our lawns to keep them from smothering the grass and creating conditions favorable for diseases such as snow mold. However, removing every leaf is not always necessary.

As a kid, I remember being assigned to rake leaves and soon discovering that collecting them with the lawn mower's bag was generally faster. When there weren't many leaves, I skipped the bag and simply mowed over them. The leaves almost completely disappeared into the grass, and I never noticed any damage to the lawn. Best of all, I felt like I had gotten away with not raking.

It turns out there was some science behind my childhood shortcut. Research at Michigan State University, Purdue University, and Cornell University supports mowing fallen leaves into lawns rather than collecting them, as long as the leaves are chopped finely enough to settle among the grass blades. These studies found that properly mulched leaves did not harm turf quality or increase thatch. As the leaves decompose, they also return organic material and nutrients to the soil.

More recently, researchers at the University of Wisconsin–Madison examined how different amounts of whole and shredded leaves affect lawns over winter. Their preliminary findings reinforce an important point: both the amount of leaves and how thoroughly they cover the grass matter.

For best results, mow when the leaves are dry. It may take more than one pass to chop them finely enough. If you need additional passes, mow in different directions to help break up and distribute the leaves.

The goal is to leave small leaf pieces that settle among the grass blades. If the grass remains buried beneath a blanket of leaves after mowing, remove the excess. You can use those extra leaves in flowerbeds and vegetable gardens. Clean fallen leaves are a valuable source of organic matter worth keeping in the landscape.

In flowerbeds, spread 2–3 inches of shredded leaves around established perennials, keeping the mulch away from plant crowns and stems. As the leaves break down, they add organic matter to the soil. The mulch also helps conserve moisture, moderate soil temperatures, and suppress weeds, including winter annuals.

You don't need to till the leaves into the soil. Soil microorganisms break them down, while earthworms and other soil organisms help incorporate the decomposing material over time.

In the vegetable garden, spread 2–3 inches of shredded leaves over bare soil. You can mix them into the soil or leave them on the surface as mulch, where they provide many of the same benefits as in flowerbeds. Incorporating shredded leaves generally speeds decomposition. However, saving some whole leaves and leaving them on the surface can provide overwintering habitat for beneficial insects and other wildlife.

If you have more leaves than you can use, bag them and offer them through local gardening groups or neighborhood sharing sites. Other gardeners may welcome this free source of organic matter. Community green waste programs that accept leaves are another good option. Whenever possible, keep this valuable resource out of the landfill.

Looking back, I suspect my parents knew exactly what I was doing. Fortunately, they let me figure out my own way to get the job done. I'm grateful they gave me that freedom—even if my main goal was to avoid using a rake.