

## The Pros & Cons to Raking Leaves



The benefits of raking leaves in the spring or fall usually outweigh the drawbacks, but what you do with all those leaves is another story. Like manure and other natural soil amendments, fallen leaves can be either a boon for the gardener or a potential environmental mess.

### Healthy Plant Growth

Your lawn needs sunlight even in the fall to store energy in its roots. A few scattered leaves on the lawn won't harm it, but a heavy layer of leaves prevents sunlight from reaching grass, which can inhibit healthy growth. Leaves left in place over winter often become wet and compacted, further damaging the lawn and creating a messy appearance. Raking up leaves in the fall keeps the lawn healthy and neat looking. Your grass and your neighbors will thank you.

### Disease Prevention

Fallen leaves often harbor disease, which can overwinter when the leaves are left on the ground. These diseases are usually host specific. For example, a disease that affects deciduous trees won't damage grass or perennials. Raking them up in the fall, though, can reduce the diseases you encounter the following spring and summer.

### Environmental Issues

Raking the leaves might keep your lawn healthy and neat, but it can create environmental issues, depending on what you do with those raked leaves. Bags of leaves often end up in landfills. In some communities, residents rake leaves into the streets, and city workers sweep them up. The problem with this strategy is that many of the leaves are washed into gutters where they make their way to streams and waterways. Here, they release nitrogen and phosphorus into the water, which encourages algae growth. Excessive algae growth depletes the water of oxygen and kills fish and other aquatic life. If you rake your leaves, compost them in a home compost pile or drop them off at a municipal "rake and take" program, which offers leaves to people who want them for their own compost piles.

### Work Load

When you were a child, few things in life were as memorable as crunching through fallen leaves or jumping in a pile of them. As an adult, though, raking leaves is often a tedious, time-consuming chore -- definitely a mark against the practice. Make your job easier by using a

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sturdy leaf rake with a long handle. Better yet, shred and pick up the leaves with a mulching lawnmower that has a bag. The shredded leaves decompose more quickly in a compost pile. You can also use them as mulch around perennials over the winter or till them into vegetable garden soil, assuming the leaves are not carrying any diseases.

