

Love Em and Leave Em!

By Robin Wilkerson

Want to attract birds this winter to your garden? Rake leaves under your shrubs.

Want to protect and naturally fertilize your shrubs this winter? Rake leaves under them.

Want to save money, diminish your carbon footprint and contribute to the healthy ecology of your garden? You guessed it.

A strange phenomenon has occurred in the last few decades. We have been led to believe that an attractive garden needs to be as clean as your living room floor. A monoculture lawn unsullied by the random leaf or acorn, the area under trees and shrubs scoured of the natural duff that nurtures plants in the wild. Leaves are not dust bunnies!

All of which brings me to the subject of mulch. Mulching is a worthy landscape practice that can help diminish weeds and protect the soil. And, leaf mulch is great for you soil. Using the ubiquitous shredded bark that may have been shipped from Louisiana and is often dyed with chemicals, is a costly and – to my eyes – bleak alternative to the bounty offered by the natural mulch we can produce from the leaves hanging over our heads. Also, bark mulch use may also require you to add a nitrogen fertilizer, because bark, as it decomposes, ties up the nitrogen in the soil. Yet another trip to the big box store...

If you prefer a more pristine look you can do one of two things to your leaves before putting them under your shrubs. 1) Run the lawn mower over the leaves to break them down. 2) If you have a string weed whacker, fill a plastic garbage can with leaves and whack ‘em right in the can. Fun!

For acid-loving plants like blueberries, azaleas and rhododendrons, nothing beats white pine needles as an organic mulch. Every fall I help a friend rake her driveway of pine needles. It's a good deal all around: she gets a clean driveway and I get a rich harvest of pine needles to mulch my blueberries. Blueberries have shallow roots and resent a heavy mulch, but a 4 to 6 inch blanket of pine needles is just the thing.

Other conventional mulching practices include protecting plants from the ravages of winter. In my own garden, I find most things muddle through on their own and in the past, the plants I have lost in the winter have been due to vole or rabbit damage rather than the cold. However, if you have plants that you feel are only marginally hardy here in New England and if you feel so inclined to insulate them, the best thing you can do is wait until the ground freezes and THEN mulch with evergreen boughs – this is where the Christmas tree comes in handy. Freeze/thaw cycles can be dangerous to plants and cause

them to be tossed out of the ground. Mulching plants in late December can protect them during those cycles.

Before people came along, nature had a dandy system of providing for plants and animals. And no one could argue that the forest primeval wasn't magnificent. When making choices in the garden it's important to think about what are the best practices to preserve the diversity of the ecological community, and the natural character of the landscape. You will be rewarded with a healthy and beautiful garden.

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The most experienced gardeners at the Lincoln Garden Club have written these sustainable gardening tips. They have read books, taken classes, made mistakes, and enjoyed successes over their years of gardening in Lincoln. Their articles are designed to demystify the process of developing sustainable gardening practices. Look for these articles in The Lincoln Journal, on the Garden Club website (www.LincolnGardenClub.org), and in the Sustainable Landscaping section of the Greening Lincoln website (www.GreeningLincoln.org.)