

## Leaf Mould

### What is leaf mould?

The clue is in the name. Leaf mould is the result of fungal action on dead leaves, unlike garden compost which is predominantly the result of decomposition. When leaves break down it is as a consequence of fungal organisms feeding on them, mouldering them down. Sooner or later the result is that we get lovely crumbly leaf mould.

This happens naturally on the woodland floor. However, in managed environments such as gardens it is not always appropriate to let leaves remain where they fall, and we do need to clear them up.

Nonetheless it is important to remember that in herbaceous beds, woodland gardens and more naturalised situations, decomposing leaves and vegetation shelter and nurture a large variety of wildlife and organisms. There is a strong argument in favour of leaving them in place through the winter months.

Given that leaf mould is a natural free resource it makes sense to get going and make your own. Or in fact just collect it all together and let nature do all the work for you.

### How to make leaf mould?



## Collecting leaves

### From the lawn:

Rather than allowing leaves to form a mat on your lawn, blocking out light and air, it is common practice to rake up leaves in autumn to maintain your lawns health. An increasingly popular alternative to using a leaf rake is to set your lawn mower blades high and use it to collect the leaves. This has the added bonus of shredding the leaves which speeds up the breakdown. Or, if you are not going to make leaf mould, then going over the lawn and shredding the leaves two or three times when they are dry enough. This should chop the leaf waste into small enough pieces to help prevent them from making an impermeable mat over the grass and speed up the breakdown. Another popular option is a leaf blower.

### From hard landscaping:

There are areas such as patios, paths and driveways, where not removing leaves can be dangerous and unsightly. Besides being notoriously slippery when wet, it is best to clear up leaves before they begin to decompose and leave their mark permanently.

### From the local surrounds:

In these times of council cuts leaves often remain uncollected in windblown piles on pavements and urban greenspaces. A ready source if you don't have your own garden leaf supply or just want to supplement it. Do however bear in mind that if you choose to collect leaves from public pavements, if they pile up beside roads with heavy traffic there will be a residue of pollutants that would best be avoided.

## What to do with your collected leaves.



You can use a frame of old pallets as containment. It's cheap, flexible and easy, and the slats let air flow through the leaf stack while keeping it all together. You could use metal mesh or

chicken wire. Likewise putting them in black bin liners (biodegradable ones please) will work, ensuring that the leaves are kept moist and aerated by poking a few air holes through. You will find that freshly collected leaves initially take up a lot of space when they are crisp and newly fallen. For the most part the volume of leaves will decrease in size significantly over a few weeks once they get wet and begin to compress. In the case of leaves shredded and collected using a lawn mower the space taken up from the start is considerably less.

Fungus like moisture and bit of air. To aid digestion so to speak. The actual breakdown into something usable takes time. Your leaf mould can happily be forgotten about in some quiet place out of the way while the fungi slowly get down to business. If nature doesn't provide enough rain, then you can occasionally stir things up with a garden fork, then give the pile a bit of a dousing to help things along.

By the end of year one you will have an excellent mulching material to use to keep your plants cosy over winter or suppress weeds and retain moisture in the growing months.

By year two will have a fine crumbly organic medium that is excellent for making your own composts and bulb fibre by mixing it with loam, grit sand or garden compost depending on the uses you have in mind.

### **Using leaf mould.**



Leaf mould is a fantastic mulch. It can be used to improve soil structure, adding organic material to poor soils and lightening up heavy, clay soils. There is also the added bonus of a zero-carbon footprint and zero cost.

*Thank you to Karen Laing, Caley Vice-President, for her thoughts on preparing leaf mould and it's uses.*