

Compost leaves and sticks on site. Hooray, this is the lazy woman's guide to highly effective gardening! Just leave those leaves in the beds where they fall. For the leaves that land on the lawn, in the fall mow them with a mulching mower. Leave the ground up leaves to feed the grass. If the leaves seem too thick where they fall, just quickly spread them around before leaving them in the bed or mowing the ones on the lawn. In spring, you will find in the beds that only the one leaf on top hasn't broken down; everything underneath has turned into nicely broken down mulch. If you want a tidier appearance and more nourishment for the plants in the beds, in the spring add a light layer of Swarthmore's or Nether Providence's fabulous leaf mold (pay in advance at the borough or township office). When the lawn starts to grow again in the spring, the grass quickly covers up any visible bits of leaves that haven't yet, but soon will be, broken down.

Sticks 1" in diameter or less are easily snapped into smaller pieces and can be tossed inconspicuously under bushes. Sticks will not break down as quickly as leaves will, but they too will slowly provide organic nourishment for your plants.

What's the environmental impact of composting on site? First, you avoid the fuel-consuming vacuuming the leaves up, hauling them to the composting site, turning them over, and then trucking them back to the purchaser. Second, by creating nutrient-rich soil, your plants are healthier and grow more vigorously and thus don't need artificial fertilizers and are much less vulnerable to disease and pests. Accordingly, you make fewer trips to the garden center and purchase fewer products, manufactured somewhere and trucked from there, to deal with your plants' ailing health or to replace them.

Yes, but what does it look like if you let the leaves stay in the beds? They provide a textured, light brown cover for the beds. The photo is of a part of this author's front bed at 215 College Ave., Swarthmore.

Again, what's the benefit of mulching? Thick mulch slowly feeds the plants, minimizes weed growth, protects the roots from drying out in the hot summer, and protects the roots from being dangerously exposed by being heaved up from freezing and thawing conditions in the winter.

This is one of nine Green Gardening suggestions from the Swarthmore Horticultural Society, swarthmorehorticulturalsociety.org, provided by Kit Raven.