

Leaves

A User's Guide to Leaves

by the Environmental Commission, Village of South Orange

We devote enormous amounts of labor, money and pollution to the suburban ritual of removing the leaves and other moisture-retentive organic matter from our lawns, and then replacing it from other sources. Instead, leaves can be mulched in place.

PROBLEMS

Once we burned them. When those hazards became clear, and the Clean Air Act banned leaf burning, the Village began picking up residents' leaves from the street. Now, unfortunately, those costs and hazards have also become clear.

Leaves Pollute the River

Everything that enters our storm-drains eventually flows into the East Branch of the Rahway River, the main stream in our village. Downstream, the river provides drinking water to residents of Rahway and Elizabeth before joining the seashore ecology. But curbside leaves clog the storm drains; bacteria from leaf runoff into the drains pollutes the river; and too many decomposing leaves take oxygen out of the water, suffocating the aquatic life.

Because of runoff pollution to the river, the N.J. Dept. of Environmental Protection is severely limiting South Orange's practice of composting our collected leaves at the Recycling Center next to the river. Runoff pollution from leaves is also the reason why you can't put your leaves out for a long period of time now—they must be put out close to pickup day.

S. Orange Leaf Pick Up Budget Items	Current Estimated Annual Costs
5,000 Gallons of diesel fuel	\$20,000
Labor—Regular Time	\$351,023
Labor—Overtime	\$20,000
Private contractor leaf removal	\$71,400
Machine parts	\$2,000
Total	\$464,423

It's Expensive

The Village currently devotes thousands of work-hours and over half a million dollars every year to dispose of the mountains of leaves that residents and their landscapers put in the street. The Village's Department of Public Works (DPW), using trucks and frontloaders, burns thousands of gallons of diesel fuel to do this job, adding soot and other pollution to the air.

Each year, 2500 truck-loads of leaves are picked up by Village from our streets. They bring 16,000 cubic yards of leaves to the Recycling Center. About 12,000 cubic yards of the leaves are then removed from the center by a private contractor, and hauled to an off-site disposal yard. The disposal contract expires in Spring 2010, when our leaf disposal costs are expected to

triple. It's in our best interest to reduce the volume of leaves put out on the street, any way we can.

Traffic Safety

Leaves piled in the streets create multiple hazards for drivers and children. Drivers swerve to avoid leaf piles, endangering pedestrians, bicyclists, and other drivers. Leaves washed down the street become slick masses at intersections, hindering braking ability. Children play in leaf piles, and drivers can't see them.

For legal, environmental, financial, and safety reasons, we must all work together now to vastly reduce the Village's curbside collection of residents' leaves. There are a variety of ways that you can help by recycling leaves.

Compost Bin Sale Day

Purchase compost bins at cost (\$20 or \$50). Pre-order or request more information by clicking the "Contact Us" box at southorange.org/Environment.

To pick up, buy, or learn about composters, come to the South Orange train station Gazebo on **Nov. 15 from 9:00 am-2:00 pm.**

SOLUTIONS

We devote enormous amounts of labor, money and pollution to the suburban ritual of stripping the leaves and other loose, moisture-retentive organic matter from our lawns and then replacing it, at great expense, from other sources. *Cleanairgardening.com* estimates that 30% of our water usage goes to servicing such landscaping methods.

Is this the best solution for the environment or our pocketbooks? What are the alternatives?

Mowing leaves and letting them mulch into the turf, thereby returning organic matter to the soil, is an environmental triple play—eliminating water pollution and the expense of fertilizing; saving money from reduced lawn watering and eliminating pollution from leaves piled in gutters; saving the Village labor costs and pollution from vehicle exhaust.

Creating perennial garden and shrubbery areas where leaves can remain where they fall is a huge environmental benefit for you, your neighbors, the Village, the river and the sea—eliminating water pollution from fertilizing and from leaf-piles in gutters; saving the money and labor of fertilizing, leaf-blowing, watering, and Village leaf collection and disposal; and eliminating the noise, cost, and air pollution from trucks, mowers and blowers.

Compost leaves in bins to create mulch and gardening humus that correctly replace spent nutrients—eliminating the cost and transportation pollution of re-importing topsoil, the cost and pollution of village leaf collection/disposal, and the water pollution from leaf-pile runoff. Mix nitrogen-rich grass clippings with carbon-rich

dead leaves, to speed the composting process.

Shredded leaves make great mulch around trees, shrubs and perennials. Leaf mulch is an attractive dark brown and slowly decomposes, releasing nutrients to the plants. A lawn mower with a bag attached is an easy way to chop and pick up leaves simultaneously. After the soil freezes in late November, insulate roses and perennials with crinkly dry leaves instead of straw.” (“Recycling Leaves in the Yard” *www.urbanext.uiuc.edu/hortihints/0010a.html*)

Bag leaves before you put them out by the curb. Many towns in New Jersey require residents to bag their leaves in large biodegradable brown-paper bags. Bagging leaves reduces pickup time and costs, and keeps them from contaminating the river. If you can’t recycle your leaves on site just yet, try brown-bagging your leaves this Fall before putting them out for curbside pickup. Branches, stones, dirt, or other debris, however, may not be bagged with leaves.

SUPPORT

The Environmental Commission encourages in-yard composting through the distribution of small composting units. **Residents interested in purchasing a composter at cost** (\$20 or \$50) can pre-order or request more information by clicking the “Contact Us” box at *southorange.org/Environment*, or come to the Village’s compost-bin sale at the train station Gazebo on Nov. 15 from 9:00-2:00.

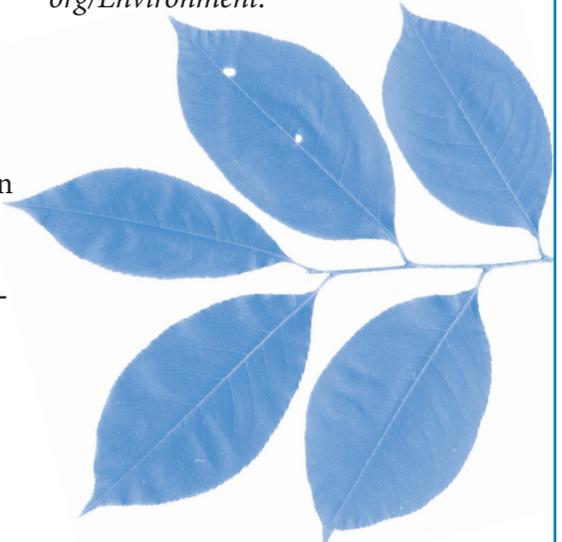
At *southorange.org/Environment*, you may ask about **Village homes that model the environmental solutions** that interest you. We will put you in touch with fellow Villagers

who can share their experiences and help you find ways large and small to achieve your own goals for a “greener” lawn and garden.

Need help filling your compost bin? Habitat for Humanity’s chapter at Seton Hall University will rake leaves for South Orange residents—pollution free!—in return for a donation to support their annual trip to create low-income housing for those in need. Contact Karoline Stankiewicz at *stankika@shu.edu* or 973-761-9197.

Of course, there is also the tried-and-true method—our own local **teenagers with rakes!** The money that we spend on noisy, polluting, mechanized landscaping can make local teens with rakes very, very happy!

To learn more, see “Home Composting” at *www.state.nj.us/dep/stormwater/tier_A/pdf/rutgershomecompost.pdf* or visit the South Orange Environmental Commission website at *www.southorange.org/Environment*.



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