

Rake Leaves and Make Compost, Mulch

by David Beaulieu

Sorting the Leaves You Rake Into Compost Bins, Mulch Bins

The landscape maintenance task that is practically synonymous with fall is raking leaves off the lawn. [Aesthetics](#) aside, this chore is necessary, since a layer of leaves left on top of your lawn over the winter would smother the grass below. If you will be saving the leaves you rake to be used in some capacity in next year's landscaping, it is important to be clear in your mind about that capacity **before** you rake your leaves. Will you make compost with them to be used as a [soil amendment](#), or will you make mulch with them? What's the difference, you ask? Please read on.

You can't just throw them into a pile and expect them to transform into a wondrous black [humus](#) ripe for next year's landscaping needs. The ingredients in a [compost bin](#) should be properly mixed and watered, and the layers of the pile need to be swapped around in a process called "turning over" the pile. Making compost with leaves is a lot of work

Leaves will decompose into compost more quickly if they are shredded before being placed in a compost bin. Leaves can be shredded simply by running a [mulching lawn mower](#) over them. Once thorough decomposition is achieved, the compost still needs to be housed in a bin of some sort, to protect it from the elements that would rob it of its hard-won nutrients

Beginners often confuse compost and mulch. The confusion is understandable, since mulch eventually breaks down and **becomes** compost in its own right. But although compost and mulch are related, they nonetheless serve two distinct functions. Compost must be thoroughly decomposed, because its function is to release nutrients into the soil immediately. But when leaves are to be used as a [mulch](#), they should **not** be thoroughly decomposed. A mulch serves not only as a weed suppressor, but also as a barrier between your soil and the heat, cold and wind from which you want to protect it. The mulch barrier lies exposed on the soil surface, so that your **soil** doesn't have to. Thus it would be a contradiction to use thoroughly decomposed leaves as such a barrier, since the nutrients they harbor should be protected for use in the soil, not exposed to the elements. It simply makes more sense to let non-decomposed materials do the rough-and-tumble work of serving as barriers.

Consequently, leaves that you'll be using for mulch should not be tossed into a compost bin, but kept in a separate "mulch bin" of their own. Like their compost bin comrades, however, it is best to shred the leaves destined for the mulch bin. Unshredded leaves pack down and prevent air and moisture from reaching your soil. Shredded-leaf mulch has less

of a tendency to pack down. Unlike leaf compost, leaf **mulch** is ready to be used as soon as you'd like.

Leaves in a mulch bin will be treated differently from leaves in a compost bin. For mulch, a bin is merely a holding tank. Unlike the contents of a compost bin, you are not trying to hasten the decomposition of the leaves in a mulch bin. On the contrary, you'd prefer them **not** to decompose. For, once they decompose, they're no longer mulch -- they're compost. And as compost, they can no longer carry out one of the main functions of mulch, which is to suppress weeds. In fact, weeds will grow...well, like **weeds**, if given a layer of compost in which to reside! Perhaps no other point so clearly highlights the difference between compost and mulch. To learn more about mulching options and considerations, see [Selecting the Proper Garden Mulch](#).

Finally, a word about the **appearance** of your compost bins and mulch bins. After all, the bins themselves become a part of your landscape and, as such, surely cannot be said to fall outside the scope of aesthetic considerations. Since you need access to the organic matter of a compost bin in order to turn it over, there is less leeway for aesthetically pleasing designs here than in the case of mulch bins. But the latter certainly can be constructed with an eye to aesthetics. You have fewer restrictions with mulch bins, since all they have to do is sit there and hold next year's mulching material in place. So be creative!