

Help lawn enjoy an annual

BUFFET of LEAVES

By John Hogan
Gazette News Service



Nature has a way of taking care of herself. The vast canopy of brilliant fall foliage soon will disappear onto the forest floor, enriching soil and sustaining beneficial microbes. Yet we insist on spoiling this annual buffet using rakes, blowers and brown paper bags.

Common thinking assumes our lawns get plenty of food through granular fertilizer. Sure, it's helpful but does not help improve the foundation of a healthy lawn, which is the soil.

"If you haven't tried to mulch leaves back into the turf, maybe this is the year you start," said Kevin Frank, professor of soil sciences at Michigan State University. Dry leaves, even oak, are shredded easily with a lawn mower provided the blade is sharp. "After a long season of mowing, the blades may be dull at this time of year, and trying to chop up leaves will be more challenging with a dull blade," Frank said.

He also recommends raising the blade to the highest level your mower allows and running the mower at normal speed.

"Don't rev the throttle to the high jackrabbit setting and blaze around the yard," Frank said. "Try to mow the leaves when they are moist from the morning dew but don't mow them when they are really wet. This will prevent the leaves from blowing all over the place and will help with your allergies."

Procrastination is a pitfall, he cautions. Mow leaves as they fall rather than waiting for every leaf from your trees and the neighbor's trees to accumulate into a knee-high blanket. "Too high would probably be greater than 3 to 4 inches of leaf depth on the turf," he said. "Mulching leaves helps the turf by returning nutrients and other organic matter, which can be especially beneficial on poor soils."

