

Compost leaves this fall to protect air quality and enrich your lawn and garden

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MADISON – As leaves start to fall across Wisconsin, state environmental officials are reminding people that autumn is an excellent time to start composting or to improve a home compost pile. Composting can help residents save money on fertilizer, save municipalities money on yard waste collection and protect the state's air quality.

Composting is better for the environment than burning leaves, branches, weeds and other yard materials. "Burning yard waste can cause health problems for your family and neighbors, pollute soil and water, and start wildfires," says Brad Wolbert, Recycling and Solid Waste Section Chief for the Department of Natural Resources' Waste and Materials Management Program.

State air quality and fire rules regulate the burning of yard materials in Wisconsin, and a growing number of communities have local rules in place that restrict or completely prohibit burning yard materials.

Composting your leaves, grass clippings and branches doesn't mean they go to waste. Composting, says Wolbert, "not only helps keep our air clean and prevents wildfires, but the compost itself is a valuable product."

Composted yard materials keep soil healthy and provide nutrients for lawns and gardens, reducing the need for fertilizers and pesticides. State law bans yard materials from landfills, but there are a number of ways residents can manage leaves and other compostable materials in their back yard or garden. Urban residents who don't compost on their own property often have access to a community compost site.

Here are a few tips for composting or reusing yard materials:

- Keep it simple. Leaves make great mulch to be used now, or in the spring. Mow leaves and grass together and leave the finely chopped material on your lawn. Ground leaves can also be folded into garden beds to add organic material and soil structure. If you would rather compost your leaves, there are many easy structures you can build to start the composting process. Search "compost bin" online for suggestions.
- Mix it up. The key to good compost is having a mix of "browns" (fallen leaves, dead plants, coffee grounds and small branches) and "greens" (grass clippings, green plants and vegetable food scraps).
- Supply the basics. Compost needs fresh air and water to help microbes break the material down and prevent odors. Rainfall and snow may provide enough moisture for an uncovered compost pile, but if your bin has a cover, add some water occasionally. Turn the compost to make sure air gets mixed in.
- Expand your horizons. Once you get started with yard materials, you can add raw fruit and vegetable scraps and coffee grounds and filters to your compost bin. Avoid attracting animals by using a covered bin and covering fresh food scraps with a thin layer of leaves or soil. Using earthworms to compost food scraps indoors, a method called "vermicomposting," is a good option for urban residents. "Feeding food scraps to worms has been a popular project in Wisconsin schools for years, and produces an excellent garden soil additive," says Wolbert. Local ordinances may apply to home composting. Contact your local officials to learn more.

More information on [home composting and vermicomposting](#) is available on the DNR website and the UW-Extension website [www4.uwm.edu] (exit DNR; search publications for "composting"). To learn more about yard waste recycling, see the [Recycle More Wisconsin](#). The DNR also has a new poster titled [Garbage to Gardens: Compost Grows \(pdf\)](#). Copies are available from Elisabeth Olson at (608) 264-9258 or Elisabeth.olson@wisconsin.gov.

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MADISON – Halloween revelers don't have to dress up as the Hulk or the Green Lantern in order to green their holiday experience. As with many holiday events, Halloween can end up generating unwelcome trash, but there are ways people can reduce this unnecessary waste and "green their Halloween." Here are some tips from the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources recycling, reuse and composting program:

- **Tip 1: Trick or Treat with a Reusable Bag:** When your family goes trick-or-treating this Halloween, carry reusable bags or containers that don't need to be thrown out after use. Cloth or canvas bags, or even pillowcases, are terrific eco-friendly choices to paper or plastic bags, or molded plastic jack-o-lanterns.
- **Tip 2: D-I-Y or Thrift Your Costume:** Instead of buying a Halloween costume that you or your children will wear once and throw away, make your own costumes from old clothes and other items you already have around the house. You can also find inexpensive, eco-friendly costumes and supplies from thrift stores or yard sales. Some parents organize costume trades, where kids choose from available, reused costumes. Once your kids are done with this year's disguise, pass the favor on and donate their old costumes for someone else to enjoy.
- **Tip 3: Compost:** If you don't already compost, Halloween is a great time to start. You can add post-Halloween jack-o-lanterns to your compost bin, along with fallen leaves, food scraps, and other organic, biodegradable yard and household waste. See the [home composting](#) page of the DNR website or new [composting poster \(pdf\)](#) for more tips on how to begin composting.
- **Tip 4: Walk, Don't Drive:** Stick close to home this Halloween and walk from house to house instead of driving to reduce your fuel use and air pollution.
- **Tip 5: Keep Halloween Clean:** Teach your children to keep candy wrappers in their bags until they return home, or to dispose of them in trash cans along their route. Preventing candy wrappers from becoming Halloween litter on the street is the right way to treat the environment.

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