

Leaf composting in Elkhart County



Why compost leaves?

- **Leaves are rich in nutrients and minerals.** Somewhere between 50 to 80 percent of a tree's nutrients and minerals end up in the leaves. By composting leaves, you can transfer this nutrition to your soil.
- **It's free!** If you have trees on your property, then you probably have autumn leaves. Instead of burning them or hauling them away, and then purchasing compost or mulch for your garden in the spring ... why not take advantage of this free source of "garden gold"?

Composting options: Photos

See the back of this handout to learn how you can make these for your lawn!



Overcoming common challenges

- **Leaves have a tendency to mat.** Shredding your leaves first – using a mulching mower, shredder, or leaf blower on the vacuum setting – will prevent this from happening.
- **Leaves take a long time to break down.** Making leaf compost and leaf mold takes lots of patience! Turning the pile often, using "crumbly" leaves such as maple and ash, and adding enough nitrogen (if making compost) will help to speed up the process. Making leaf mulch requires no waiting time, and is great for homeowners who want to use their autumn leaves right away.

For more information – Elkhart County resources

- Elkhart County Leaf Management: www.elkhartcountyswmd.com/leaf-management
- Purdue Extension Elkhart County: <https://extension.purdue.edu/Elkhart>

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Composting options: How-To

If you want to improve soil texture and fertility: **Leaf compost**

Optional preparation: Shred your leaves with a mulching mower, shredder, or leaf blower on the vacuum setting.

1. Fill the leaves into a compost bin. Also, be sure to add nitrogen-rich item, like grass clippings, fertilizer, or vegetable waste from your kitchen. A good rule of thumb is to use four parts leaves per one part nitrogen.
2. "Turn" your pile every few weeks, using a shovel or garden fork.
3. When you turn, check for moisture. Add water if the pile is dry, and add more leaves if the pile is soggy or smells rotten.
4. Repeat steps 4 and 5 until the compost is ready. The compost is ready when it is dark in color, dry and crumbly in texture, and smells earthy, which takes 2 to 12 months.



If you want to retain moisture in your soil: **Leaf mold**

Optional preparation: Shred your leaves with a mulching mower, shredder, or leaf blower on the vacuum setting.

1. Fill the leaves into a compost bin, or into a large plastic garbage bag.
2. Water the leaves until they are damp, but not soaked.
3. If you are using a bag, tightly seal the bag and cut a few slits for air flow.
4. "Turn" your pile every few weeks. If you are using a compost bin, use a shovel or garden fork; if you are using a garbage bag, shake the bag.
5. When you turn, check for moisture. Add water to the leaves as they dry.
6. Repeat steps 5 and 6 until the leaf mold is ready. The leaf mold is ready when the leaves have become a brown or black crumbly material, which takes 6 to 12 months.



If you want to protect your plants: **Leaf mulch**

Optional preparation: Shred your leaves with a mulching mower, shredder, or leaf blower on the vacuum setting.

1. Apply a 6-inch layer of shredded leaves to your flower beds and around your trees.
2. If you have more leaves than you need, pack them up in bags for use in the spring.

