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Got Leaves? Make Leaf Mold

By Lydia Holley

“All the leaves are brown, and the sky is grey,” sang The Mamas & The Papas. For the gardener, that means it is time to make leaf mold. I think leaf mold would be more popular if it were called something else. Although it may sound a bit gross, the end product is not. Even the process is simple.



Leaf mold is a soil conditioner made from - you guessed it - leaves. Finished leaf mold looks similar to compost and can be applied to the garden in the same manner. Place it on top of the soil or mix it in. The difference between compost and leaf mold is the ingredients, the carbon ratio and the process. Compost breaks down from bacteria; leaf mold from fungi.

Like compost, leaf mold helps the soil retain moisture, improves the soil's structure, and increases microbial activity. However, some resources say it is considered a better soil conditioner than compost since it can increase moisture retention over 50%.

If having a compost pile seems like too much work, you will love making leaf mold. It requires little of the gardener except patience. Because it is a cold technique (unlike compost, which generates heat), leaf mold may take six months to two years to completely break down, depending on the size and type of leaves you include. To speed up the process, you will want to break down the leaves into smaller pieces, make certain your leaves stay moist, and introduce air by mixing the leaves occasionally.

You can make leaf mold by piling up leaves, turning them with a pitchfork, and watering when needed. Or, you can make leaf mold using the plastic bag method. This is how I plan to make leaf mold.

First, you need to gather leaves into a pile. In order to speed the decomposition process, either run over the leaves with a lawn mower or place them in a large garbage can and shred them with a string trimmer. Remember, the smaller the pieces you start with, the faster they will decompose. If you do not want to break your leaves down into smaller pieces, you can skip this step. You will just have to wait longer for a finished product.

Place your leaves into a black plastic bag and water well. The mixture needs to stay moist in order for the decomposition process to work. Cut a few holes into the bag for aeration. After that, you will need to roll the bag (or shake it if it is small enough) every few weeks to help aerate it. You will also want to keep the leaves moist by adding water as needed.

That is it. After a few months, you will have a dark, rich, earthy product that your garden will love.

For more information, call 903-675-6130, email hendersonCMGA@gmail.com, or visit txmg.org/hendersonmg.

