



*Leaf litter?
No, that's called
autumn*

by Marilyn Loser

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“I would welcome having an oak or an elm or a maple tree in front of my apartment building even if I would have to rake the leaves myself,” declared an apartment dweller.

Some of us love the fall ritual of raking leaving and pondering why the leaves fall in the fall. Kids (or the kid in us) love jumping into piles of crackling, dried leaves. Others hate the very idea of raking; perhaps the joys of cooling summer shade are only a distant memory as they tug their jackets close to block a brisk fall breeze.

One of my fall pet peeves is the use of leaf blowers. They're noisy and smelly and I wonder if they are any better than a good rake. On the other hand, I applaud the use of mulching lawnmowers for cleaning up leaves that fall on the lawn. These mowers chop the leaves into small pieces and spit that back on the lawn for easy “recycling” by microbes and worms. I have a small lawn and a hand mower so this doesn't work for me.

OK, so you've collected all your leaves. What to do with them? You can try crumpling them and mulching flower beds. I do this in conjunction with leaving flower stems about six inches long to help hold the leaves in place. This helps protect the roots from our wide winter temperature swings and protects low evergreens and hardy ground covers from winter sun burn.

You can bag them up and take them to the yard waste recycling centers in Alamosa. There is no additional cost to Alamosa residents for this service. Please, remove the plastic bags before dumping into the recycle bin – they don't make good compost!

Burning is not an option in Alamosa. Did you know that it is illegal to burn leaves anywhere in New York State? While burning does remove unwanted vegetative debris, it also produces a large amount of smoke. Agricultural field burning (which burns more than just leaves) is widely practiced many places including Serbia, Croatia, and Bulgaria. It removes waste and helps cut down on weeds and pests. However, the air was so thick as I traveled across these countries this fall, it was very hard on asthma sufferers and non-asthma sufferers alike. The practice is much more regulated in our country.

Somehow we deal with our leaves. But why did they fall in the first place? And why in the fall? Deciduous trees in Alamosa mostly shed their leaves in late fall at the beginning of the dormant season.

“When leaves become inefficient and unable to produce food and growth regulators, a process of shutting-down and sealing-off begins,” according to Dr. Kim Coder, School of Forest Resources,

University of Georgia. “Leaf shedding has two components – active and passive. This shedding process is called abscission.” It refers to shedding tissue such as branches as well.

“By carefully examining fallen leaves and the leaf scars from where each fell, several things are noticeable,” says Coder. “The wound is usually smooth with vascular tissue clearly visible. The wound looks as though the leaf snapped-off in one catastrophic moment. Actually, leaf abscission is the culmination of many events and actions by the tree and within the environment. Leaves are actively prepared for removal through biological and mechanical means.”

Trees develop fracture lines at the base of leaves allowing the leaves to tear away without exposing the tree to additional damage. Leaf abscission is part of a process which allows the tree to seal-off tissues which will soon be killed or consumed by the environment. Time frames for the process vary by tree species. Juvenile trees may even hold dead leaves throughout the winter as they haven’t yet developed all the necessary process features.

The passive part of tissue shedding is development of structurally weak areas along which force can be concentrated and tissues torn away by the environment. “In other words, some tissues have cells which are actively broken apart, while other tissues have built-in weak zones which allow these tissues to be ripped away by forces such as gravity or the wind,” according to Coder.

“Everything about life requires some element of 'maintenance'. If the beauty of trees (or people, pets, a home, or a car) are just too much a burden to you, then why don't we simply pave over the earth and put up a parking lot? It is SO much simpler.” David Bartlett, Minnesota