



# Alamosa Landscapes

## To Rake or Not to Rake Leaves in the San Luis Valley?

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I don't know anyone who really enjoys raking leaves, but many still feel they must every fall. But should you? It depends on your tastes, your yard, and your gardening goals. It's important to remember we have a typically arid and windy winter climate. It's very different from the climates of many Midwestern and eastern states where there are lots of deciduous trees that drop piles of leaves that can help suffocate lawns as pile ups of winter snow and ice produce an additional layer that helps suffocate the grass.

I've met folks in town who focus on their lawns. I especially see yards in downtown Alamosa where people remove leaves. If you have a lot of old trees that drop piles of leaves, you might want to remove some of them so a dense mat doesn't form restricting moisture and air to penetrate the soil. On the other hand, if you have a light dusting of leaves and live in a relatively low wind area of town leaving the leaves can enhance your grass by the composting of the leaves and providing nutrients for the soil. It also provides habitat for beneficial insects.

In addition, a study by Michigan State University found that dealing with leaves in this manner greatly reduced the amount of dandelions in the spring. Crop and soil sciences doctoral student Alex Kowalewski said the team recorded about 80 percent fewer dandelions in the test plots and about 50 percent fewer in the second year. They were unable to determine whether one leaf species prevented dandelions from growing better than other species.

In more moderate areas of the country, some suggest that leaf cover also restricts the amount of sun that reaches the grass thus killing the grass. In our city, most grass goes dormant in November and the problem is more of sun scalding the grass over the winter. One especially sunny, dry, and windy winter at least half of our grass died due to these conditions.

One solution to lawn care is to wait until the leaves are crunchy and run a composting lawn mower over your lawn cutting the leaves into bits that compost over the winter and add nutrients to the soil. Don't have a composting lawn mower? Some web sites say running a regular mower over drier leaves one or two times does the trick. I can't speak from experience on this.

If you really want a tidy lawn, consider moving the leaves to garden areas of your yard. I focus on how to enhance gardens and trees through leaf mulch. We live on the west side of town with few obstructions to

the south and west – the direction of prevailing winds. Hence, it can be very windy and any leaves blow into fences, buildings, or corners if left unattended. We also get a lot of sun and I worry about sunscald and drying out underground roots. My approach in recent years has been to scoop up the piles of leaves, lay them over flower garden areas and under trees in a manner that they aren't compressed. I then cover them with chicken wire so they don't blow in windier areas.

Whatever approach you take, try to reduce sending piles of garden debris to the landfill. At least take to recycling! In the U.S., a heaping 33 million tons of yard debris is disposed of per year, totaling more than 13% of the nation's solid waste, according to [theweathernetwork.com](http://theweathernetwork.com) website.

*"Summer ends, and autumn comes, and he who would have it otherwise would have high tide always and a full moon every night; and thus he would never know the rhythms that are at the heart of life."* Hal Borland