

It's My Park | Leaf Raking

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All leaf raking projects must be approved by NYC Parks staff.

During the fall, managing fallen leaves from the deciduous trees in our parks is an important consideration for maintenance staff and gardeners—and for volunteers like you. Fallen and decaying leaves provide important benefits such as habitat for insects and microorganisms. They also provide nutrients for the soil, help the soil with moisture retention and temperature regulation, and suppress weeds. Accumulated leaves on paved surfaces, on the other hand, are a detriment and can be a serious slip hazard. In this guide, we provide tips on how to rake leaves, dispose of them, and review instances where it's best to remove leaves versus circumstances where we recommend letting leaves lie to support our local ecosystems. *Please note, this guide is to be used as a reference. All leaf-raking projects must receive prior approval from NYC Parks.*

Raking and Disposing of Leaves

- Wear gardening gloves and proceed carefully when working in leaf piles to avoid any possible hidden hazardous materials such as broken glass or needles.
- Gather leaves into piles using leaf rakes (metal or plastic). Be sure to rake with tines pointing down into the ground and move the rake towards you. Watch this [video](#) for more detailed instructions.
- Use a broom on paved surfaces to gather small pits of leaves.
- Move leaves from the pile by pressing two leaf rakes together, scooping with a plastic snow shovel, or using paired leaf scoops.
- To dispose of leaves, after removing litter and other trash from the piles, you can:
 - Place into leaf (paper) bags to ensure that they are sent to leaf collection areas for composting.
 - Dump collected leaves in a fenced-off leaf pile in your park for local decomposition. Ask your park manager or community engagement coordinator to see if one exists in your park.

- Toss into the underbrush of any nearby wooded area or into areas of bare soil to act as natural mulch.
- Collect into garbage bags if the options above are not available.

Managing Leaves on Pathways, Steps and Other Man-Made Surfaces

- Accumulation of fallen leaves on made-made surfaces such as pavement, concrete steps, and safety surfaces in playgrounds create a slipping hazard and should be promptly removed.

Managing Leaves on Lawns

- A thick accumulation of leaves on lawns can smother the grass and prevent it from growing the following season.
- It's best to remove most leaves from lawns; leaving a thin layer (0.5") will allow the nutrients from the decaying leaves to enrich the soil.

Managing Leaves in Garden Beds

- Decaying leaves in garden beds provide the varied benefits mentioned above. Leaving a layer that is too thick, however, can smother the plants of a garden bed, so it's important to be strategic in raking leaves in these areas.
- If a garden bed is located near or under trees, think ahead and remove all leaves from the area in early to mid-fall to allow for additional accumulation later in the season. Check again later in the season and remove or move around leaves as necessary to uncover any plants.
- Leave about a 3" layer of leaves on the soil to allow for decaying throughout the year, and remove the leaves of other plants to avoid smothering.
- For a more polished look, leave a 1" layer of leaves around plants and cover with 2" of wood chips or mulch.

References

NYC Parks FHNR Horticulture Team. "Leaf Management. Leaves in Garden Beds."