
About Trees: Bag the bags, leave leaves -- your lawn will thank you

By Fred Morgan

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As I have driven around the city in the past few months, the hundreds of plastic bags stacked on curbs and filled with raked leaves have been impossible to ignore.

Raking up the leaves is, of course, the culturally correct thing to do, and our love affair with green lawns requires it.

But the trees would prefer it if we didn't bother with that traditional fall project. For them it would be much better if last season's old necrotic leaf material would be left onsite to compost and add to what would ultimately result in a rich, organically alive topsoil that encouraged aeration, water dispersal and a happy root expansion.

The typical Memphis soil is clay, a small-pored soil type that tends to absorb water slowly and hold on to it tightly in much the same way that a cotton string will pull water upward along its length when one end is immersed in a glass of water. This water-holding characteristic encourages root rot.

When combined with the usual lack of organic content in manicured lawns, it tends to also discourage the presence of mycorrhizae, a fungal organism that normally works with plant roots in a mutually beneficial relationship when the soil is undisturbed, as it is in natural forests.

When clay has an organic content lower than 3 percent, the mycorrhizal spores tend to dissipate. This decreases plant vitality and increases susceptibility to drought and insect attacks.

Mulching your leaves and leaving them in place is preferred to complete removal. Also, it is a good idea to periodically get a soil report from a local testing service, like A&L Laboratories on Whitten Road. This will let you check not only the soil pH (most deciduous trees like a pH range between 5.6 and 6.2), but also the levels of macro-elements and the percentage of organic content in the soil.

If your report indicates a low level of organic content (below 3 percent) in areas near important large trees, one option would be to consider having mycorrhizal spores injected back into those vital root growth areas.

Another would be to expand the radius of mulched areas around key trees.

A third strategy is increasing soil aeration through a pattern of augered holes (2 inches wide by 14 inches deep) on 3-foot centers under the drip line of the trees.

Fill the holes 80 percent to the top with ProMix, small pea gravel and/or coarse sand. Then top them off with a little dirt and a plug of grass if appropriate.

Certified arborist Fred Morgan of Cordova has owned and operated Morgan Tree Service since 1974, and is involved in arboricultural consulting, diagnostics and problem solving. His column runs in Home & Garden once a month. Get more tree info at morgantreeservice.com.



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