

Tree Leaves Clinging or Piling Up

By: Kelly Feehan, Extension Educator

For Release: Week of November 9, 2020

Dead leaves that usually drop off are clinging to trees and shrubs. Or they are dropping and piling up on lawns, shrub borders and gardens.

While leaves cling to trees every year on oaks and a few other types of trees, we're seeing it in trees like maples that normally don't do this. This is called marcescence which means retention of dead plant parts that normally drop off.

In shade trees and shrubs, as fall weather turns cooler and days shorten, cells at the point of attachment between leaves and twigs begin to form an abscission layer. Once developed, this layer is what causes leaves to drop.

When an early frost or other odd weather interrupts this process, or kills leaves before the abscission layer forms, leaves can cling well into winter. Winter snow and winds will eventually knock them off or as growth begins next spring, new leaves will push off old leaves.

When marcescence happens, most trees and shrubs are fine in the long run. However, this can be a sign cold weather occurred before plants were hardened off and some may show signs of cold temperature injury next spring.

Temperatures did drop below 10 degrees F already and some plants could have been damaged. There is not much we can do but wait and see what happens next spring.

Help your plants this winter by watering them during warm winter days. If the cold temperatures did not damage them, going into and through winter dry very well could.

Another issue that can occur with clinging leaves is they catch and hold more snow during winter. The added weight may result in increased branch breakage.

Trees like silver, Autumn blaze and red maple are weaker wooded due to their fast growth. If you have a fast growing tree whose leaves are clinging, be alert to falling branches if we have heavy, wet snows this winter.

For falling leaves, Extension is asked if they can be spread on perennial flower beds and vegetable gardens. The answer is yes, but there is an exception when it comes to perennial flowers.

On vegetable gardens, a layer of trees leaves will protect soil over winter, suppress fall weeds, promote beneficial critters like earthworms and pollinators, and eventually improve soil structure when decomposed.

In perennial flower beds, they provide the same benefits along with winter protection. But be aware a leaf layer may promote plant pests like slugs; and a very matted layer may hold too much moisture around the crowns of perennials susceptible to crown rot.

The benefits of leaving leaves around ornamentals outweighs the disadvantages and is encouraged but it might be best to keep them away from slug favorites like Hosta. Or remove them if you had a serious insect issue this past season.

If using leaves as a winter mulch, wait to pile the leaves over plants until after the plants have gone dormant and the soil has begun to freeze. Leaves should be raked away in spring before plants begin to grow.