



By Barbara Elmore, HCMG

Hogging Leaves For the Compost Pile

Confession time: I am a leaf hog. If possible, I'd ply the streets of Fredericksburg and "steal" all the leaves that residents have raked there to wait for the city's charming practice of picking them up. My compost pile would be a compost mountain.

As stealing street leaves is not practical (although a city official told me to go right ahead) I hog my own leaves for the compost pile or for mulching into the lawn. They are an excellent natural fertilizer and a basic compost ingredient

However, they break down more quickly into rich compost if you shred them first. So a couple of years ago, I went shopping for a leaf vac-shredder that I could operate on my own. Although I admire men and women who can effortlessly swing such tools one-handed, that's not me. I need something lightweight that's made for two-handed operation.

Research pointed me to an electric Black & Decker Leaf Hog. The name expresses my philosophy perfectly. But even better is the weight: 8 pounds when the leaf bag is not filled. Cost: About \$75. Not bad when you divide it by number of uses or the fun you have using it. The Leaf Hog has an adjustable shoulder strap and a hand grip that resembles a saddle horn. Grip that with one hand, the second handle with the other, and flip the switch.

As in previous years, I have made vacuuming leaves from our pecan trees one of my winter gardening projects. This is my third season to use the Leaf Hog and it's still chewing up leaves into bite-size pieces. My only worry is that the plastic attachment for the leaf bag seems flimsy. It hasn't broken yet, however.

Here's what I've learned about going this route to shred leaves:

- Use a light touch. Since the Hog's small grinder can't take twigs or pecans, just nose the end of the vacuum over the leaves. Dry leaves come up easily and with practice you can avoid grabbing unwanted debris.

- Plug it into a 50- or 100-foot extension cord so you can wander freely as you vacuum.

- Don't rake the leaves into piles first. I tried this the first time I used the Leaf Hog, and discovered it's easier to vacuum as you walk. The suction is strong enough for easy pickup. I mostly vacuum sidewalks, the driveway and areas near the house, leaving the rest of the leaves to nourish the grass.

- Empty the bag often or it will get heavy.

- Detach the bag on the grass, not the sidewalk you've just vacuumed, unless you don't mind vacuuming the same spot again.

- Wear goggles and a face mask, even if you don't suffer from allergies. The dust you stir up irritates eyes and nasal passages. Headphones are also a good idea; it's loud.

Maybe I would tire of using the Leaf Hog regularly, but I've found I vastly prefer vacuuming outdoors rather than indoors. And this far surpasses raking leaves.

