



Master of Mulch

by Carol Brinkman, HCMG

Compost and mulch are two terms familiar to all gardeners, but a great deal of confusion is created when these terms are used interchangeably. Compost is decayed organic matter used to amend and enrich the soil to create a healthier environment for plants, which in turn makes healthier plants. Mulch is a top-dressing for soil. It protects plants from extreme temperatures; it reduces evaporation of moisture; and it inhibits the growth of weeds.

Both composting and mulching are key to successful gardening, and no one knows this better than HCMG Carolyn Nall. Carolyn also knows that producing your own compost and mulch is better for the environment and easier on the bank account.

Nall says she has “a small house on a lot and a half.” Approximately 1200 SF is turf grass, and all the rest is gardens, beds, and pathways. “I went on the garden tour offered by the Travis County Master Gardeners, and I noticed that almost all the beds and paths were mulched with shredded leaves.” Inspired by what she saw, Carolyn has developed a system for producing both mulch and compost that is worthy of imitation for several reasons.



“I started collecting leaves in the fall of 2007 intending to use them to add to my compost pile. Now, most of my shredded leaves are used for mulch. That first year I collected 200 bags and used them all by August. In the fall of 2008, I collected 300 bags. Most of the leaves were collected right in my neighborhood, and I got to meet many of my neighbors for the first time. The first year, after I picked up his first batch, one of my neighbors shredded and delivered the rest of his leaves to me. The second year, another neighbor delivered the rest of his leaves to me. Then another neighbor came out when I stopped to pick up his leaves, and commented that he thought I was not coming this year because I was running late. Another neighbor put out a sign saying, “Please pick up the leaves.” This was the fun part,” says Carolyn.

The bagged leaves are stored on wooden pallets lining the back fence line after the leaves are shredded using a relatively inexpensive, lightweight leaf shredder. The shredder comes equipped with both long and short legs. The short legs can be placed directly on a trash can lined with a bag. The long legs let the grass drop onto a tarp from which the grass can be scooped up with a dust pan and placed in a bag or any container that can be carried easily to the area to be mulched or to the compost pile if needed.



Nall lines the garbage can with bags saved after collecting the neighbors’ leaves. She cautions that if the bags are filled too much, “Either I can’t get it out of the can or the bag tears. It is also about as much as I can carry comfortably, and the bags stack better if they are not overly full. It doesn’t hurt for the bagged leaves to sit for a while, both before and after shredding, if I have other priorities.” Another piece of advice is to check carefully for any unwanted ingredient that might be included in the scavenged bags of leaves. “And, especially don’t forget to wear a dust mask, goggles, and ear plugs,” she adds.



Proudly, Carolyn says, “I harvested my first compost this year. I got about one square yard, and it was beautiful. When I was spreading it in the front yard, one of my neighbors asked if I was spreading *my dirt* (meaning dirt I had made or dirt I had purchased). I can hardly wait for the next batch.”

