

Easy ways to clean up leaves

Autumn is marked by colorful foliage and plummeting temperatures. Once those leaves reach peak color, they fall from the branches and collect on lawns, necessitating cleanup projects. For homeowners with big yards, such a project can be tiring and time-consuming. However, there are ways to make leaf cleanup easier.

One of the easiest ways to clean up leaves is to reach for a lawn mower rather than a rake. The mower will cut leaves down to smaller sizes, creating an effective mulch that can add nutrients back into the lawn. Davey, a lawn and landscape solutions service, says that mowed leaves also can be collected in a mower bag and added to garden beds or compost piles.

For those who prefer manual raking, select a rake with tines that will not skewer the leaves in the process. Big rakes also can make faster work of gathering leaves into piles.

The home improvement resource The Family Handy-



man advocates for the use of a lawn sweeper. This is a manual device that has a rotating sweeping brush that gathers up lawn debris and leaves into an attached hopper bag. Like mowed leaves, the bag can be emptied into a compost pile or distributed where needed.

Raking leaves onto a large

tarp is another option. Once it's full, the tarp can be taken to the curb where many towns will collect the leaves seasonally. Otherwise, the tarp can be used as a funnel to put leaves into a gardening bag or another appropriate receptacle.

Leaf blowers remain a fast option for cleaning up yards,

but they require electricity or gas and can be noisy. Still, they are a popular choice for large landscapes or when quick work needs to be made of leaf clean-up.

Leaves will fall in autumn, but luckily homeowners have various methods at their disposal to tame the mess. FH198139

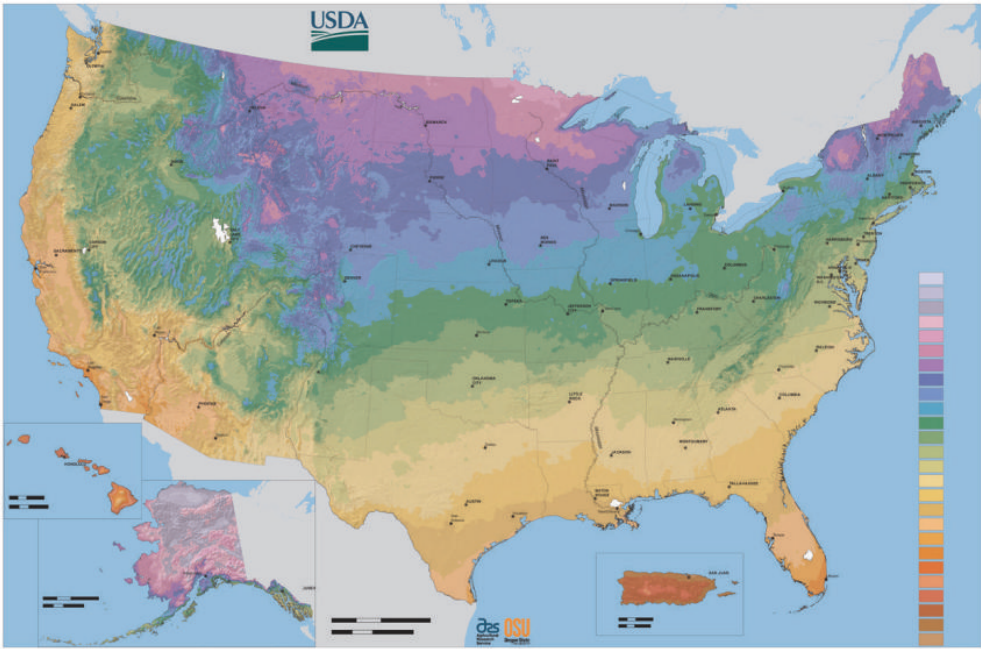
Understand hardiness zones before planting

Gardening benefits the environment in myriad ways. Maintaining natural landscapes and preserving green spaces can reduce the collective carbon footprint of the human race. Trees, flowers and other greenery filter the air and create welcoming habitats for all species of animals and insects.

Many home gardeners set out each spring to create landscapes that cater to all of the senses. But choosing plants that are unlikely to thrive in certain climates can lead to dissatisfaction and premature plant demise and may require gardeners to use more fertilizers, pesticides and other not-so-Earth-friendly techniques to help plants thrive.

One of the more important steps gardeners can take before spring arrives is to educate themselves about plant hardiness zones. Hardiness zones are defined by the average climatic conditions of the region and are broken down into various zones. The USDA Hardiness Zone map divides North America into 13 separate zones. Each zone is marked by 10 F incremental differences from the last zone. In some versions of the map, each zone is further divided into "a" and "b" regions.

The National Gardening Association says the USDA Hardiness Zone Map was revised in 2012. The latest version was jointly developed by the USDA's Agricultural Research Service and Oregon State University's PRISM Climate Group. To



USDA Hardiness Zone map courtesy of the USDA. View an interactive version at the USDA website.

help develop the new map, the USDA and Oregon State University requested that horticultural and climatic experts review the zones in their geographic areas. As a result, the zone boundaries in the 2012 edition of the map have shifted in many areas. Canada's Hardiness Zone map, updated in 2010, uses nine different zones.

Zone maps are tools that show where permanent landscape plants can adapt. Home gardeners who are looking for shrubs or perennials to last year after year should recognize that such plants must tolerate year-round conditions, including the lowest and highest temperatures and the amount of precipitation. Snow cover and humidity

also can impact a plant's propensity to thrive.

While zone maps are not perfect, they can be useful in planning and ensuring the survival of future gardens. Plant and seed manufacturer Burpee says that other factors to consider that also affect the viability of plants include wind, moisture and soil conditions. The company offers an interactive zone finder on their website that will indicate the hardiness zone as well as average first and last frost dates. Visit www.burpee.com/findgrowzone to enter a zip code.

Learn more about plant hardiness at planthardiness.ars.usda.gov/PHZMWeb. In Canada, visit the site www.planthardiness.gc.ca/?m=1.

Did you know? Square footage

According to the home improvement resource HomeAdvisor, adding square footage to a home can cost homeowners anywhere from \$7,000 to \$100,000. When adding square footage to a home, homeowners may need to knock down an interior wall or walls, the cost of which can vary widely depending on the walls being knocked down. Load-bearing walls are needed to

support the home, and while such walls can be removed, homeowners may need to hire structural engineers at additional cost to orchestrate such removals. In addition, homeowners can expect to pay more when knocking down walls that contain ducts or electrical wiring. It also can be costly for homeowners whose homes are old to knock down walls. HomeAdvisor notes that the

wall-removal process in old homes that contain lead paint or lath-and-plaster walls is more intricate and may cost homeowners more money. FH188181

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