

Fall leaves help control weeds

Weed control is not top on my list as a reason to use mulch. There are weeds that can push through mulch such as nutsedge (nutgrass) or that can germinate and grow in the mulch. But done correctly, mulching plant beds can help inhibit some weeds.

Mulch can make landscapes look more attractive. It keeps roots evenly moist, acts to insulate roots from extreme heat and cold and can help decrease loss of soil from wind and water erosion. Mulch serves as a barrier to some soil-borne diseases. And, as organic mulch breaks down, it improves the soil's fertility, aeration, structure and drainage.

Tree leaves make good mulch. They can be placed on the soil surface beneath and around shrubs, trees, perennials, annuals and vegetables.

Mixing leaves from several different species of trees can make better leaf mulch. Leaves of the same size tend to mat together and produce a shingling effect that can shed water and reduce gas exchange in the soil. Shredded leaves stay seated better on the landscape than whole leaves.

A mulch layer three inches deep after settling is enough for most plants. If possible, extend the mulched areas out to the outermost leaves (called the drip line) and beyond. And be sure to pull the mulch back a few inches from the main trunk. Never pile mulch around the trunk.

So, instead of putting all those leaves curbside in plastic bags to be hauled off, use them to benefit your landscape, which may include fewer weeds.

The final plant clinic of 2011 will be held Thursday, October 20 from 10 a.m. to 1 p.m. in Fort Walton Beach at the Okaloosa County Extension Service building, 127 W. Hollywood Blvd. The plant clinic is designed to provide a place and time for people to bring in samples of plants for diagnosis, including weeds for identification.

To participate, bring a sample of the weed, plant, insect, etc., to the clinic. Bring a fresh sample. This may include a plant stem with several leaves, a 4-inch square of grass with roots attached, etc. You may also bring a sample of your soil for pH testing.

The final plant clinic of the year does not mean that you can't have your lawn, landscape and garden problems solved through the UF/IFAS Extension Office. Master Gardeners staff our building in Fort Walton Beach each Friday from 9:30 a.m. to 12 noon to help answer your gardening questions. Our office in Crestview, located at 5479 Old Bethel Road, is open each weekday 8 to 5.

Larry Williams, UF/IFAS Extension Office, Okaloosa County, October 13, 2011