

To Burn—or not to Burn

That hint in the air, of cold and snow to come. We feel the premonition of all of that in the autumn wind along with the aroma of smoke from burning leaves and yard waste. There is something magical about the way flames dance in a fire. Unfortunately, something sinister awaits us in the odors from backyard burning.

- The smoke generated by a large number of simultaneous leaf fires can cause significant health problems. Leaf smoke can irritate the eyes, nose and throat of healthy adults. It can be much more harmful to small children, the elderly, and people with asthma or other lung or heart diseases. This is because the visible smoke from leaf fires is made up of tiny particles that can reach deep into lung tissue and cause symptoms such as coughing, wheezing, chest pain and shortness of breath--symptoms that might not occur until several days after exposure to leaf smoke.
- Besides being an irritant, leaf smoke contains many hazardous chemicals, including carbon monoxide and benzo(a)pyrene. Carbon monoxide binds with hemoglobin in the bloodstream, which reduces the amount of oxygen in the blood and lungs. Carbon monoxide can be very dangerous for young children with immature lungs, smokers, the elderly, and people with chronic heart or lung diseases. Benzo(a)pyrene is known to cause cancer in animals and is believed to be a major factor in lung cancer caused by cigarette smoke. It is found in cigarette smoke and coal tar as well as leaf smoke.
- According to U.S. Environmental Protection Agency studies, sometimes concentrations of air pollutants resulting from leaf burning can be so high that the air does not meet federal health standards. In fact, in some areas burning of leaves and brush sometimes causes much higher levels of air pollution than all other forms of air pollution combined (such as factories, automobiles, and lawn and garden equipment).
- Leaf burning can also reduce visibility, create safety hazards, cause a nuisance, soil buildings and other property, and create additional demands on local police and fire protection.

So, burning is bad, then what are we to do? Why not try composting? Composting, is a natural process that has been going on since the first ferns started their slow decomposition into what we are now using to fuel our Harley Davidsons. Modern day composting speeds up the natural decay process of organic wastes. The result is a humus like compost end product by controlling air (oxygen), water, food, and temperature. Not only does composting get rid of yard waste, it turns this waste into a useful gardening product. And so we can safely and smartly answer the question of “to burn or not to burn” with a resounding **not!**