

TREES AND WATER POLLUTION

Oak, maple, hickory, ash, apple and more. They provide shelter and food, not just for us but critters, too. They give us warmth from a fire, are a jungle gym for the kids and give us cool shade from the sun with all those leaves—all those leaves! Yup, lots and lots of leaves, every year, falling in your yard. What do leaves have to do with the water quality of Dane County's lakes and streams? A lot.

Storm Drains and Ditches Drain Directly Into Our Lakes and Streams

Contrary to what many people believe, the water that goes into the storm drainage system, including ditches, is **not** treated at wastewater treatment plants. Rather, it drains **directly** into our lakes and streams. Some communities don't have a storm drainage system made up of inlets and pipes, rather, runoff flows into ditches, but that runoff isn't treated either. And most folks don't realize that leaves can be a nagging source of local water pollution.

In autumn, leaves make their way into our lakes and streams when rain washes them down the storm drains and ditches. Once they get into the water, the leaves release nutrients that contribute to the accelerated growth of algae. The result is a greenish-tinted lake choked with foul smelling, dying algae that can kill fish and other aquatic critters and generally make water recreation an unpleasant experience.

Keep Leaves Out of the Street and Gutter and Ditches, Too

While they are natural, and seem biodegradable and harmless, excess leaves pose a threat to the quality of water in our lakes and streams. So this autumn, when the leaves blanket your yard, follow these guidelines and leave the leaves out of the water by keeping them out of the street and gutter or ditch. Whatever goes into the gutter or ditch will eventually go into our lakes and streams.



This fall, consider mulching or composting. If you rake, make sure the leaves stay out of the gutters and ditches.

Compost

Adding leaves to a compost pile creates an inexpensive and nutrient-rich fertilizer for your vegetable and flower gardens. In our urban environment, composting allows us to imitate and reap the rewards of the natural recycling process. Check out <http://clean-water.uwex.edu/pubs/stewards/Y013.pdf> for more information on composting. Contact your local municipality for rules and instructions.

Till

Leaves can be tilled directly into a garden, contributing valuable organic matter.

Mulch

If you have a mulching mower, you can chop the leaves into small particles that will decompose directly into your lawn. If you have a bagger on your mulching mower, you can use the leaves to mulch flowerbeds and shrubs.

Rake

Many of us rake the leaves for curbside pickup. If you do, collect the leaves at the edge of the curb—not in the gutter or ditch. Make sure to sweep or rake any leaves out of the street, gutter or ditch. Cover the leaves with a tarp or bag them until the day when work crews pick up the leaves. Contact your local municipality for the leaf collection dates and requirements (bagging, covered on curb, etc.) for your neighborhood.

Some communities still allow you to burn leaves. Keep in mind, however, that ashes are a source of highly concentrated nutrients. Runoff can carry the ashes in the nearest pond, stream or lake. So if you're allowed to burn, don't burn in a ditch or other area where storm water could carry the ashes to a lake or stream. Some people use ashes in their garden.



These leaves will be washed to the nearest lake or stream. The solution is simple: to keep it out of the lakes and streams, you've got to keep it out of the gutter and ditches.

Inevitably, some leaves will get into the water regardless of what we do to stop them, but we can prevent most of the pollution by following these simple water-friendly practices.

You're the Solution, From Trees to Lakes

You probably don't realize it, but you live on "waterfront property." In fact, most everyone in Dane County lives on a lake or stream when it comes to storm water runoff. That's because the distance between your yard and the water's edge is as close as the nearest storm drain or ditch. So, the simplest way that you can help clean the lakes is to keep the leaves out of the gutter or ditch.

In wooded areas and grassy fields, rainwater and melting snow soak into the ground, as nature intended. Leaves generally decompose where they fall. But in urban areas, these "pervious" surfaces have been paved over so that rainwater gushes down our sidewalks and roads, delivering the leaves along with dirt, oil, fertilizers, grass clippings, garbage and more from the streets and gutters into the storm drainage system, including ditches, and eventually our lakes and streams.

So, a big source of water pollution today actually comes from you and me. Individually, we contribute little pollution. Collectively, our urban households are damaging Dane County's lakes and streams through simple neglect and lack of awareness.

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