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Safe and effective ways to clean up leaves

Removing leaves from the yard is a task that homeowners must perform each fall. Thousands upon thousands of leaves can drop from a single tree. Multiply that by the number of trees on a property, and it's no surprise the task of leaf cleanup can seem so daunting. Furthermore, not all leaves are shed at the same time, so several cleanup sessions may be necessary before the last leaf is banished from the yard.

Just like removing snow, leaf cleanup can be a taxing job if done by hand. For people unaccustomed to exercise, cleaning up leaves can turn into quite a workout. According to the Discovery Health Calorie Counter, raking leaves for one hour can burn nearly 292 calories. Shoulders and arms will feel the burn. Raking leaves is considered moderate physical activity, similar to brisk walking. Those who find themselves straining or out of breath should take a break, and these tips also make the job safer and easier.

• Wear layers when cleaning up leaves. It may be cool at first, but it's easy to work up a sweat after raking for awhile. Layers can be peeled off so as not to get overheated or risk hypothermia from sweating in chilly temps.

• Pay attention to your posture while raking. James Weinstein, chairman of the Department of Orthopedics at Dartmouth Medical School, recommends forming a wide base with the feet and holding the rake slightly toward the end of the handle with one hand three-quarters of the way down the handle from the other. Do not twist the spine; move your entire body. Avoid overuse of muscles on one side of the body by switching sides periodically.

• Do not try to rake or blow leaves



on windy days. Wind will only make the task that much more difficult, which could lead to overworking oneself.

• Avoid overfilling bags. For those who plan to mulch and bag leaves, remember that compressed leaves can get heavy pretty quickly. Do not overfill bags, as they can be hard to move or bring to a recycling center. Using a leaf blower to push leaves into piles will reduce the strenuousness of the task, but leaf blowers can be heavy and noisy and gas-powered blowers can produce a considerable amount of exhaust.

Raking leaves can be quite a chore. It is important that homeowners take steps to prevent injury while cleaning up leaves in their yards.



Identify winter birds in backyards

Birds flittering around the neighborhood are a common sight during spring and summer, and these welcome guests can be enjoyable to observe as they nest, feed and interact. When the weather cools in fall and winter, many birds seek out warmer climates, but a good number of these feathered friends stick around.

Certain birds can be found all winter long across regions of North America. The Great American Bird Count is a program that is run by the Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology and the National Audubon Society. Its purpose is to seek the help of volunteer birdwatchers across North America to observe and count all the birds seen in a 15-minute interval during a four-day data collection period. This program helps identify birds that are most commonly seen in cold temperatures and study the composition and distribution of the winter bird populations across North America. Birds seen during this time

may change from year to year, though certain species are more likely to be around in the winter months.

• Northern cardinals: One of the more iconic winter birds, the bright red cardinals are around much of the year but perhaps most noticeable against the snowy, stark landscape of a winter's day. Cardinals use their bright, powerful bills to crack open seeds and cut through sugary fruits to help them survive the winter.

• Tree sparrows: Tree sparrows are large-bodied and long-tailed sparrows with gray and reddish-brown streaking along the edges of their feathers. They also wear a bright chestnut colored cap. Despite their name, tree sparrows spend much of their time on the ground feeding. The bird count has unveiled a greater number of tree swallows in recent years. These birds are insectivorous, so milder winters may be contributing to their increased presence.

• Tufted titmice: Tufted titmice

resemble cardinals in body and head shape, albeit on a smaller scale, but they are pale gray in coloring. These are bold birds who defend territory with scolding calls.

• Blue jays: These common, vibrant birds are well known to many people. They are large-crested songbirds with broad, round tails. They have white or light gray feathering on the underside of their bodies with various shades of blue, black and white on the top. A favorite food is acorns, and these birds are often found on forest edges. Their calls are loud and carry long distances.

• Mourning doves: Many people hear mourning doves before they actually see them, as their soft cooing often comes from roof rafters and tree branches. These birds have plump bodies and long, tapered necks, with a head that looks particularly small in comparison. They tend to be brown to buff color. When the birds take off for flight, their wings make sharp whistling or whinnying sounds.



• American goldfinches: These birds are sometimes called the "wild canary" of the Americas. They have distinctive yellow plumage that fades in winter to a palette of buff, brown and gray. They're small seed-eating birds that often travel in flocks.

Birds may need a little help surviving in the winter. Keep fresh, unfrozen water around and supplement food scavenged with peanut butter, suet and nuts. Brush piles, roost boxes or birdhouses can provide needed shelter.





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