

WHY LEAFMOULD ?

Trees are nature's soil builders. The floor of forests and deciduous woodland is often referred to as an ideal soil-creation system, steadily recycling and accumulating plant foods. A mature tree produces several acres of leaf surface area annually compared to moss which only grows a few millimetres. Leafmould is not just an alternative to peat, it is in fact far superior and more versatile.

Mature leafmould both retains moisture and promotes aeration. After a year in storage it can be added to heavy soils to create a workable loam. This produces a feast for worms and soil micro-organisms which will flocculate clay and generate humus. After 18 months, it can be roughly chopped and used as a mulch or forked into established beds to improve soil structure, texture and tilth. It also darkens the topsoil which means it will warm up quicker and easier. It is ideal for rejuvenating tired, neglected or abused soils. At this age, it can also be prepared for use in potting compost mixtures by further chopping and riddling. Sieving through 1 cm mesh produces an ideal fibre for potting on established plants and seedlings or for rooting cuttings. Finer screening and older mould can even be used in seed mixes.

So when the first gales and frosts start to strip the trees bare, be prepared to harvest the best of the year's crop of leaves. You will find an abundant supply locally, if you get there before somebody else. It makes economic and common sense to collect and recycle this valuable, multi-purpose resource. The old practice of burning leaves seems bizarre and the municipal policy of dumping large volumes in landfill sites is almost criminal. Leaves oxygenate and filter the air we breathe. Leafmould is the gardener's gold-dust.

LEAFMOULD - HOW

AUTUMN - Collect leaves soon after they fall, when dry if possible. Sweep them into piles with a broom, fork or hay rake. Windy weather will often produce deep drifts ready for you to collect. Pack them into binbags or larger nets to carry to storage site. Larger loads can be carted by wheelbarrow or van.

A wide variety of leaves from different types of trees will result in a balanced end-product. Beech and oak leaves contain more calcium and makes the best mould. Sycamore is worst, only breaking down to a rough, woody fibre, but is still worth mixing with other types

If you collect from local woodland, check with the landowner and only remove a fraction of the total. It may be necessary to remove twigs and branches.

Street leaves from busy roads will be contaminated by exhaust emissions, but all leaves pick up airborne pollution when growing. Correct processing will help to render these contaminants inert. Collect leaves from the pavement or roadside before the roads have been gritted with salt. Try to remove any plastic, glass or metal refuse as you collect and store the leaves.

WINTER - Stack loosely in a heap with blocked in sides so that the wind will not blow them away. Leave the top open to the elements so that the whole heap can become saturated with rainwater. After about two months, turn heap to make sure it is fully moistened all through.

SUMMER - Pack the leaves down and cover with carpet and/or plastic to stop them drying out in hot weather.

AUTUMN -Chop vertically through the heap with a sharp spade into inch cubes. Transfer material to smaller containers to make space for the next year's leaves and store open to the elements for the second winter.

SPRING - Chop again, keep dry ready for riddling and rubbing to produce potting compost.