

Falling Leaves

It is that spectacular time of year. Autumn brings a magnificent show to Wisconsin as the trees turn red and gold with leaves drifting gracefully to the ground. It is beautiful! But fallen leaves can spell trouble for our watersheds. Storm water runoff carries leaf litter and other organic material to the nearest receiving body of water via storm drains. Leaf decomposition in the water results in high levels of phosphorous and nitrogen – far more nutrition than needed. Excess phosphorous and nitrogen cause algal blooms, depleted oxygen, and fish death.

For communities that collect leaves from the streets, a study conducted in 2016 by William Selbig, Research Hydrologist from the USGS in Madison, WI, demonstrated that removing leaf litter and organic debris from the streets **prior to a rain event** reduced the annual total phosphorous load in storm water runoff by 80%. In other words, well-timed leaf collection goes a long way toward phosphorous load reduction. That is a significant amount. Even better, when coupled with decreasing the amount of leaves deposited into the streets, phosphorous and nitrogen yield were further reduced.

We all play a role in protecting water quality. Here's how you can help:

- Compost leaves and other organic yard waste either on-site or at a designated official municipal site.
- Mulch leaves as you mow. It is great for the soil!
- Use leaves as a top dressing or mulch for your garden beds.

We are all in this together! We can enjoy our gorgeous Wisconsin autumns and still protect our precious waters. It's a WIN-WIN.

Respectfully submitted by Nan Calvert, Program Manager for Respect Our Waters.