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Contact: Virginia Green Industry Council

540-382-0943

[Info@VirginiaGreen.org](mailto:Info@VirginiaGreen.org)

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## **GoGreen Gardening Column**

### **Leaf Mulch Mowing – Going Green by Going Brown**

Below is an excellent example of how one Virginia city is working to be environmentally friendly, as well as saving money and supporting the Virginia Green Industry Council's Green Industry Code of "promoting recycling and conservation of natural resources" by our guest columnist Dwayne D'Ardenne.

### **Necessity is the Mother of Invention**

By Dwayne R. D'Ardenne, Street & Landscape Superintendent for Roanoke's Transportation Division and a resident of the Greater Deyerle Neighborhood.

"What do I do now?" As part of the budget reduction process this past spring, the City of Roanoke eliminated its annual loose leaf collection program. This decision was made, in part due to citizen feedback received through the Budget Survey conducted in March 2009, a majority of whom noted a willingness to accept elimination of loose leaf collection in order to assist in balancing the budget.

As autumn days get shorter, leaf chlorophyll production slows, revealing the ever-present pigments of yellow, orange, and brown. Further, sunny days and cool nights lead to production of leaf pigments which add the deeper orange, red, and bronze shades. As autumn continues, those brilliant leaf colors that we all enjoy slowly begin to fade and the leaves fall with quickening regularity. Back to the question: "What do I do now?"

The City of Roanoke and others have long been proponents of a quicker, easier, and environmentally friendly method of leaf disposal. It is called mulch-mowing. Since 1996, the city has been mulching leaves in its parks and on other city-owned properties. In these difficult economic times, we all continue to look for the most efficient ways to get things done. Mulch-mowing is one such operational efficiency that the city has utilized for more than a decade.

Some skeptics say mulch-mowing leaves will “smother” their grass, however in his mulch-mowing publication entitled “Leave Them Alone: Lawn Leaf Management,” Virginia Tech’s Extension Turfgrass Specialist, Dr. Mike Goatley, disagrees. Also, a recent article in Grounds Maintenance magazine titled “Mulching tree leaves: an alternative to disposal,” by Zac Reicher and Glenn Hardebeck, references a Purdue University research report which shows that a 6” to 8” deep layer of leaves could be mulched without negative effects on turf quality, color, thatch accumulation, soil pH change, weed populations, or disease. Furthermore, the same study found “Increased soil microbial activity [which] indicates improved soil quality. Therefore, we expect that the heavy clay soils on which many new subdivisions are now built should improve as the trees mature and their leaves are mulched into the turf. Our data [also] suggested an increase in water-infiltration rates. This data was not conclusive but, combined with the increased soil microbial activity, suggests mulching tree leaves improves soil properties.”

So, what to do with all those leaves? Why not try something new this fall! Anyone with grass to mow can also mulch their leaves. Even without a specifically designed mulching mower (most mowers purchased within the last decade are designed for mulching), leaves can be mulch-mowed by simply installing a mulching blade. Costs for the blades start at around \$12 and are available at most Roanoke Valley retailers that sell lawn and garden equipment.

For more information, visit the city’s Web site at [www.roanokeva.gov/leaves](http://www.roanokeva.gov/leaves) or call 540-853-2676.

As the 'GoGreen' columnist for the Virginia Green Industry Council, I want to challenge you to 'GoGreen', keep the Commonwealth of Virginia green and growing. Familiarize yourself with drought tolerant and pest resistant plants. Then, join me and my colleagues in our effort to enhance the beauty of the state's environment, the well-being of our citizens, improving our state's economy, and improving the health and wellness for everyone in Virginia. For details of the Council's activities, see [www.viriniagreen.org](http://www.viriniagreen.org) or call 540-382-0943 or email [info@VirginiaGreen.org](mailto:info@VirginiaGreen.org) . Together, let's 'GoGreen'! For Gardening Tips, go to [www.viriniagardening.com](http://www.viriniagardening.com)

Jeff Miller, founder of Horticulture Management Associates LLC, serves as the Executive Director for the Virginia Green Industry Council, [www.viriniagardening.com](http://www.viriniagardening.com). Contributing a diverse background of nursery, greenhouse and landscape experience, Miller challenges all to 'GoGreen'.

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Virginia Green Industry Council  
383 Coal Hollow Rd  
Christiansburg, VA 24073-6721

540-382-0943 [info@viriniagreen.org](mailto:info@viriniagreen.org)



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Caption: "Leaf Mulch Mowing helps the lawn and eliminates raking and leaf disposal."

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