

Leaf Education Task Force – An Evaluation of Proposals for 2016

As some of you already know I am graduate of the New York Botanical Gardens' professional training program in gardening, a former licensed N.Y. State pesticide applicator, and former owner of a business in that industry for more than a decade. My education regarding the environmental benefits (or not) of leaf mulch mowing has involved considerable review of university published research studies and conversations with Westchester County horticultural experts, such as the staff at Cornell Cooperative Extension. My training and former career provide easy access to former colleagues, so to speak. I am also acquainted with a member of the board of the NYS Turf and Landscape Association and had several discussions with him on this topic.

In preparation for the final meeting of the LETF I spoke with Jerry Giordano and Amy Albam, both of whom have been horticulturists with CCE for 20 plus years. I asked to be brought up to date on the current findings of local studies conducted by the Cornell Waste Management Institute currently taking place, as well as for any other scientific material that would be helpful in making recommendations and proposals to the Board of Trustees of the Village of Scarsdale. They were clear in stating that although mulch mowing research shows improvements to the quality of various aspects of top soil composition, varying depending on any number of factors. No research has yet been done to examine the CO2 emissions from the mowers/mulchers and leaf blowers involved in mulch mowing. Without such research, any attempt to compare CO2 emissions to other methods of leaf disposal management, including the vacuuming Scarsdale currently employs, is just guesswork. As CO2 emissions are the number one contributor to climate change and global warming, it is crucial that such information be gathered before promoting mulch mowing as an environmentally beneficial garden practice.

I asked Jerry to provide a statement to be presented at the last LETF meeting, which he did.

“As to our making a general statement about mulch mowing or stating a CCE position at this point, we are waiting for the science to come in for that. We can then formulate a position based on the research findings and it's probably beneficial in the long-term for municipalities to do that as well and especially with the tick question added to the mulch mowing equation. Also, we might say that the practice of mulch mowing involves both biological science as well as the behavioral science. This is why the study is being done under real world conditions. This way, the evidence will not only have been gathered from test plots under more controlled conditions. The latter is the place from which most university based research information on mulch mowing has thus far come. More controlled studies have their place of course, but so does the current kind of university research that the Cornell Waste Management Institute is currently carrying out...and right here in Westchester! A big part of Cornell University is about research of course and Cooperative Extension's role is about applying/making available that research for the good of those we serve. “

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The tick question Jerry mentioned is related to using whole leaves as mulch for garden beds, borders, etc. Public health agencies and departments of health along the east coast, including the Center for Disease Control recommend eliminating "leaf litter" from the garden as it provides a habitat in which tick populations overwinter and breed. Tick-borne illness in Westchester County is an increasing public health concern and part of the Cornell Waste Management study includes dragging for ticks.

There is so much passion surrounding the topic of mulch mowing it often obscures the facts. We cannot make or support public policy based on the "hunches" and hysteria that has people shaking jars full of mulched leaves as if this is all there is to it. It's so easy! But is it environmentally sound?

I recommend that the education campaign cease until we have results and recommendations from the studies currently underway in Westchester. The complexity of this issue has been obscured and benefits of mulch mowing have not yet been shown to include reduced CO2 emissions. Residents who continue to have an interest in mulch mowing can find more than enough information on the Internet to assist them. It would be a waste of municipal resources to provide more at this time, and may be misconstrued as support for mulch mowing as well. I recommend that any change in leaf management/disposal by the Village of Scarsdale wait until further research information is available.

The commercial landscape industry, represented by the NYSTLA spoke to these factors in their reluctance to show support for mulch mowing as well. They do support discontinuing pick-up of grass clippings.

Yours sincerely,

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LETF