FREE HOMESTEAD GUIDE

Fall Finds

Free things to collect this fall for a better garden next year



Every fall, your neighbors pay to get rid of the things your garden wants most. Leaves get bagged for the curb. Tree crews pay to dump wood chips. A little hustle now turns their waste into next year's soil, drier paths and cleaner pens.

1. Leaves — free fertilizer that falls from the sky

Where to find them

- **Neighbors.** Offer to rake, or just ask for the bags. Most people are glad to see them go.
- **Craigslist and OfferUp.** Search "free leaves" or "bagged leaves," or post your own wanted ad: "Will pick up bagged leaves."
- **Curbside.** Paper yard-waste bags are fair game in many areas. Ask first.

> **Ask one question:** "Do you spray your lawn?" Skip leaves from yards treated with weed killer. Pick out trash and plastic as you go.

Tip: Run them over with the lawn mower first. Shredded leaves break down faster, mat less and blow away less.



One afternoon of neighbor leaves, picked up by the bagful.

What leaves do for you

- **Frost blanket.** A few inches over tender plants acts like insulation. For one plant, ring it with wire and fill with 3–6 inches of shredded leaves.
- **Winter rain shield.** Protects bare soil from heavy rain, erosion and compaction.
- **Future soil.** Leaves break down into rich organic matter. Pile them alone and you get leaf mold, a dark, crumbly soil builder.

2. Wood chips — free from the tree crew

Where to find them

- **Flag down the arborist.** See a tree crew working nearby? Stop and ask if they need a place to dump chips. They often pay to unload, so a close driveway saves them time and money. Leave your number if they're busy.
- **ChipDrop (getchipdrop.com).** A free service that matches you with local tree crews looking to drop a load. Make an account, verify your address, and request a drop with instructions on where to dump. Paying is optional ($20–$80) and can help your request get picked up. You don't choose the timing or exact size, so pick a spot that can take a big pile.
- **Neighbors with too much.** A drop can be huge. Watch local Facebook groups, Craigslist and OfferUp for "free wood chips, come shovel." Bring a truck and a fork.



Before: tractor ruts in soft winter ground. This is where chips go first.

> **Animal pen caution:** Ask the crew what trees they cut. Chips can carry leaves and clippings from plants that are toxic to livestock, like yew, rhododendron, black walnut or wilted wild cherry. When in doubt, use that load for paths, not pens.



Open a pile and you'll find dark, fungus-rich chips inside.

What wood chips do for you

- **Mud control.** Lay 4–6 inches on winter paths, gate entries and high-traffic spots.
- **Drier animal pens.** Chips help drain wet ground and keep animals out of the muck.
- **Hold the leaves down.** A layer of chips over leaves on your beds keeps them from blowing away all winter.
- **Jump-start the fungi.** Arborist chips grow fungal threads (mycelium) as they break down. Those fungi build healthy, living soil.
- **Weed control.** A thick layer of coarse chips smothers most weeds.

> **Garden bed tip:** Use chips as a top layer, not mixed into the soil. In spring, rake them aside or into your paths before planting.



Moving chips by the bucketload.

3. More fall finds worth grabbing

- **Post-Halloween pumpkins.** Ask neighbors, farms and stores for their leftover displays. Great goat and chicken treats. Skip any that are painted, moldy or rotting.
- **Straw bales from fall decorating.** People toss them after Thanksgiving. Use as garden mulch or pen bedding. Ask if they were sprayed.
- **Logs and branches.** Tree crews often leave the big rounds behind. Bury them under leaves and soil to build a hugelkultur bed that soaks up winter rain.
- **Coffee grounds.** Many coffee shops give away bags of used grounds. Add them to your compost with your leaves.
- **Cardboard.** Plain brown boxes, tape removed. Lay under chips on paths to smother weeds.



One neighbor's leftover display, free for the hauling.



Storage tip: an unplugged old fridge keeps them dry and critter-proof while we feed them out.

The simple winter bed recipe

1. Pull weeds or cut spent plants at the soil line.
2. Spread 4–6 inches of shredded leaves.
3. Top with 1–2 inches of wood chips to hold it all down.
4. Walk away until spring.

By planting time, the leaves have settled into soil and the worms have done the rest.



Sources

Chalker-Scott, L. *Using Arborist Wood Chips as Landscape Mulch.* WSU Extension FS160E.

Oregon State University Extension. *Should I leave fallen leaves in my flower beds?*

Colorado State University Extension. *Mow, Compost and Mulch Leaves.*

ChipDrop Support. *Paying for a ChipDrop – Gardeners and Homeowners.*

From our Washington homestead to yours.

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