

Keep Autumn Leaves off the Ground and out of the Storm Drain

Lovely to look at as they drift from the trees, autumn leaves left to accumulate on the ground can have negative effects on the health of Hampton Roads waterways. Street and yard flooding, litter “dams” and algae growth can occur when leaves block or enter the storm drain. To combat such consequences, the message from askHRgreen.org is clear: Keep leaves and yard debris out of the storm drains.

“Raking, bagging or composting are easy alternatives for keeping the leaves off the ground and out of the storm drain,” said Julia B. Hillegass, public information and community affairs administrator for the Hampton Roads Planning District Commission and askHRgreen.org team leader. “The purpose of the storm drain, or catch basin, is to collect the rain water and melted snow—not leaves, trash or other pollutants.”

Hampton Roads localities service an average of 45,000 catch basins annually. Here’s what happens when fallen leaves are left untended:

- Leaves that fall to the ground inevitably accumulate at the mouth of stormwater drains and ditches, causing “dams” that capture both leaves and litter.
- These pollutants then clog up the storm drains and ditches causing street flooding (even with light or moderate rainfall).
- Once the leaves that enter the storm drain begin to decay, they release nutrients that contribute to excess algae growth in the waterways.
- Algae growth uses up dissolved oxygen needed by fish and crabs and can result in a decline in their populations.

In addition, while cleaning up outside, make sure to pick up after your pet. When it rains, pet waste can be washed into the storm drain and then along to area streams, the bay and ocean—polluting the water we swim in and harming aquatic life with high levels of nitrogen and bacteria.

“No one wants to be responsible for street flooding on their block or to inadvertently contribute to the decline of aquatic life,” said Hillegass. “So do the right thing—keep our storm drains free and our waterways clear.”

Good to Do:

- Before you clean up outside, pick up after your pet!
- Clean up your leaves and yard debris.
- Check with your locality to learn when leaves will be collected and how they should be stored (bagging, placement, etc.) and only place leaves and yard debris out at the designated time.
- Do not rake or blow leaves into the street where they can be washed into the storm drain.
- Rake leaves out of the ditches and storm drains.
- Consider using the leaves as mulch, mowing over them and leaving the finely-chopped debris on your yard.
- If you choose to compost your leaves, contain your compost in a bin.
- Never dump leaves or yard debris into ditches, streams, or other waterways.