

## Yard Trimmings Management Strategies in New Jersey

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### Introduction

Most yard debris consists of leaves, grass clippings, prunings, branches, trunks of trees, and their root systems. There are various options for managing these materials. The following are some guidelines to assist decision makers and others in determining best management strategies.

### Materials Management Guidelines

**Leaves:** In New Jersey, leaves were banned from landfills, transfer stations, and incinerators in 1988. Collected leaves are generally composted at municipal, regional, commercial, or farm sites in large windrows (elongated piles) using the Leaf Composting Manual for New Jersey Municipalities as a guide. Municipal, regional, and private facilities can use a Type 1.11 simplified New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection (NJDEP) permit, if fewer than 20,000 cubic yards of leaves are composted annually, or a more detailed Type 2.1 permit, if the volume is greater.

Farmers can accept leaves for composting with the simplified permit if the volume is less than 20,000 cubic yards or can receive leaves to

be mulched into the soil at no greater than a six-inch depth on the soil and within seven days from delivery without need of a permit. This requires that the leaves be incorporated into the soil no later than the next tillage season.

Backyard composting (household scale) is the most cost-effective method of leaf composting because of avoided collection costs, tipping fees, permits, equipment, and management costs. Refer to fact sheets FS074 and FS117. Further detailed information about composting and trimmings management can be obtained through Rutgers Cooperative Extension and the NJDEP, Bureau of Resource Recovery.

**Grass Clippings:** Ideally, lawns should be mowed frequently (about five-day intervals) removing only one-third of the grass blade. The clippings will biodegrade at the soil surface providing nitrogen and organic matter. Although any type mower may be used, mulching mowers or mulching attachments on traditional rotary machines can improve the results by chopping more finely. If clippings are long and clump on the lawn, the excess can be raked up and used as a nitrogen source in the backyard composting pile. Permits can be issued by the NJDEP to include a limited volume of grass clippings in large-scale leaf composting facilities, but the rules



are quite stringent to prevent odor problems, which are common, when grass is composting in an anaerobic (oxygen-deficient) environment. A one-year farm grass clippings demonstration permit is available to farmers from NJDEP to apply grass around seasonal crops under a nutrient management plan.

**Prunings:** Trimmings from trees, shrubs, hedges, and perennials are composted at some permitted facilities, but can also be composted in the backyard pile. A shredder-grinder is helpful to break down larger woody material to a more compostable size.

**Tree Limbs:** Limbs can be cut for firewood or chipped to make a mulch for landscape use. If finely ground, the product can be composted, but at a slower rate than leaves or grass clippings. Woodchips can be used as a carbon source, when composting sewage sludge.

**Tree Trunks:** Trunks are usually cut, split, and dried for use as firewood. Some desirable species are used to make furniture and cabinetry, and others are ground for mulch or pulp.

**Tree Root Systems:** Excavated tree roots are generally ground into mulch material. Massive root systems and trunks that are not made into firewood or mulch cannot be stockpiled at a site and are classified as Type 13 Bulky Waste, which

must be hauled away for grinding or other processing.

## Summary

Because yard trimmings are recyclable through composting or other means, it is prudent for government, businesses, farmers, and other people to avoid non-recycling avenues for managing this important fraction of the solid waste stream.

## References

1. **Backyard Leaf Composting**, FS074, Franklin Flower and Peter F. Strom, Dept. of Environmental Science, Cook College.
2. **Grass—Cut It and Leave It**, NJDEP Division of Solid Waste Management, Office of Recycling, in cooperation with Rutgers Cooperative Extension. 1991.
3. **Leaf Composting Manual for New Jersey Municipalities**, Peter F. Strom and Melvin Finstein, Dept. of Environmental Science, Cook College and NJDEP. 1989.
4. **Using Leaf Compost**, FS117, Roy Flannery and Franklin Flower.

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