

That Pesky Yard Waste: It's Biodegradable, So Why Can't I Just Dump It in the Woods?

By Susan Jewell

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You've just spent hours mowing the lawn, trimming the shrubs or raking leaves. Now you have a pile of clippings and leaves, and you want to get rid of it. So you haul it down the street to the neighborhood woods and dump it there. You figure that it's natural, so what harm could it do? The answer is, it is not exactly natural, and therefore, it is likely to be harmful to the environment and, therefore, also illegal.

This is a case of appearances being deceptive. There are at least five reasons why dumping leaves, grass clippings, branches, soil and other plant or animal materials in a natural area can harm it.

- These materials often contain pesticides and fertilizers that were applied to the yard. Pesticides intended for lawn grubs and other pests can also kill beneficial insects, fish and other wildlife if the contaminated grass or soil is moved to their habitat. Chemicals used on commercially purchased Christmas trees to keep them looking fresh longer may sicken deer and rabbits if the trees are dumped after the holiday. Lawn fertilizer may seem beneficial for a natural area, but even small amounts will disrupt the natural balance of nutrients in the environment. Any materials that are dumped can wash downhill into local waterways, carrying poisonous chemicals and excess nutrients to aquatic life. Excess fertilizers cause devastating algal blooms in water that kill fish.
- Ornamental plantings can become invasive if moved to a new area. A natural area, such as a county park, should support only native plant species. The Fairfax County Park Authority wages a constant battle to keep nonnative species out of our parks. If people dump house and yard plants (even broken pieces) on parklands, the new species may start growing out of control. English ivy and pachysandra are two-yard plants that should never be dumped in the woods.
- Organic waste may contain plant diseases or insects that can destroy native life. Pet wastes may contain bacteria, such as *E. coli* and fecal coliform bacteria, that can sicken wild animals and people. Often the wastes wash downhill into streams and ponds during heavy rainfalls and contaminate the water.
- Piles of excess rotting vegetation in water bodies use oxygen normally found in the water, stealing it from fish and other aquatic life, which then die.
- Piles of some yard debris eliminate natural homes for wildlife. Furthermore, the dumped piles are unsightly. For these reasons, it is illegal to dispose of plant and animal materials on public lands that are not specifically designated for this purpose. Some areas have signs posted that say "No Dumping." This includes yard debris. However, dumping is not allowed even if no signs are present.



Photo by Susan Jewell

My street has a county-owned median strip that borders a drainage ditch. The ditch empties into Accotink Creek, which empties into the Potomac River, and that in turn empties into the Chesapeake Bay. The creek is a Chesapeake Bay Resource Protection Area (a sensitive area that drains into the Potomac River). Some residents dump yard debris into the median strip. This debris washes downhill into the water, carrying pesticides and fertilizers into the creek. The piles of leaves smother the natural vegetation and choke the waterway. All of this contributes to the

pollution of the Chesapeake Bay. The median strip appears to residents to be a free-for-all chunk of land; however, it is not. If all the people in my neighborhood had the same idea of dumping Christmas trees, dead shrubs and other vegetation, the tree-lined strip would look ugly and decrease property values.

So where should you dispose of your yard debris? The proper way is to leave it for your trash removal company to collect on the day that the company specifies. Another is to create a compost pile in your back yard, and let the material decompose away from natural areas.

The moral is that what may appear to you to be harmless to the environment is known by experts to cause many problems. The safest way to prevent such problems is to not dispose of anything on land that is not yours. The penalty for dumping is up to \$1,000 or 30 days in jail, or both.

If you find dumping of fill in Fairfax County that you suspect is illegal, call the Code Enforcement Branch at 703-324-1937, TTY 711. If you find dumping of any kind on county parkland, call the Fairfax County Park Authority at 703-324-8594, TTY 703-324-3988.

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