

## SIMPLE FROST PROTECTION:

*A simple, effective way to protect tender shrubs against frost? Put your tender plants to bed!*

Many of us have a few worn-thin bed sheets, or old duvet covers the kids have outgrown, which we're loath to get rid of for sentimental reasons. Would it surprise you to discover that they can double as very effective frost protection blankets?

While humans wrap up in layers of clothing to keep out the cold air and trap our body warmth, the point to frost protection cover is not to hold in the plant's heat but to trap the ground heat as it radiates upwards, holding it around the plant. The trick is not to gather and tie any sort of covering around the plant's base; rather, let it drape straight down to the ground, and secure it against the wind with a few bricks or heavy stones.

It is important though, to remove this cover when the daytime temperatures warm up, especially near to spring when late frost is a very real danger. Late frost typically occur on a cloudless night when little cloud barrier to prevent the warm air captured at ground level through the day escaping up into the vast atmosphere; these clear evenings usually herald sunny days causing heat build-up beneath the sheets that can damage new growth.

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## 5 WAYS TO USE WINTER LEAVES

*Don't throw away these valuable nutrients - recycle them back into the garden.*

I love the American name for autumn; fall – so descriptive of this season, don't you think? Woodland and forests provide us with instructions on how to use these fallen leaves; leave them to form a protective cover over the ground. In these habitats, the soil is deep and friable, all because of this protective cover and resulting nutrient recycling.

Racking leaves off lawn and flower beds has to be one of the most labour-wasting activities around. Fallen leaves are still packed with nutrients; rather than bagging them for removal to the dump, do what nature does and complete the nutrient cycle feedback loop by using them to feed the soil in an existing area, can be a tough task; use the length of this winter season to begin the process by smothering the turf with a thick layer of fallen leaves! When you're ready to build the bed in spring, simply pile up the leaves to the side, and, once all plants are in, place them on top of the soil as mulch.

### **1. Mulch planted beds:**

Firstly, let's look at leaf texture and size; large leaves work better within beds if crushed into smaller sizes. Thick, leathery leaves can take a long time to decompose, so, shred them first by running the blades of the lawnmower over them before incorporating them into either the garden bed or the compost heap.

Allow those around trees and shrubs to remain; within flower beds, let them be as long as the layer is not too deep. Distribute piles garnered from paving and driveways onto sunny area beds spread about 5 cm thick; this blanket helps to suppress weeds, retain soil moisture, regulate soil temperature, and, in frosty climes, acts as an insulation blanket. Small leaves that crush easily, or those you shred, work better as a soil conditioner than as a mulch layer. Either way, this is nutrient recycling at its best.

## 2. Leaves on Lawn:

Mow straight over them – but do it frequently, don't let the pile build up too high! When done in spring through to autumn, the resulting tiny shards mix with the short grass cuttings and eventually filter through grass blades to enrich the soil – grass clippings, by the way, provide the growing grass plants with needed nitrogen. In winter, a turf lawn's resting time, lift the mower blades to ensure you shred only the leaves.

## 3. Pile them up beneath your shrubs:

These oft unseen and forgotten areas can be breeding grounds for weeds. A deep layer of old leaves will help to suppress unwanted germination, and feed the shrubs; a 2-in1-one solution. Take a look first though to see if any desirable groundcovers have taken root as this thick layer could smother them as well. Down here in Gillitts (above Durban), two important and valuable shade grasses, *Oplismenus hirtellus* and *Pseudechinolaena polystachya* generously take root beneath my shrubs, so, if I want inclined to clear leaves off hard surfaces (I am a 'reduce unnecessary labour at all costs' type of gardener), I spread a thin and shredded layer here as a nutritious feed.

## 4. Use leaves to prepare next season's beds.

Here's a novel idea: Planning a new bed, or increasing the size of existing one in spring? Smother the lawn with a thick layer of leaves. Removing lawn for a new bed, or when extending an existing area, can be a tough task; use the length of this winter season to begin the process by smothering the turf with a thick layer of fallen leaves! When you're ready to build the bed in spring, simply pile up the leaves to the side, and, once all plants are in, place them on top of the soil as mulch.

## 5. Bag some for leaf mold; add a batch to the compost heap.

We covered this a few weeks ago; place leaves in a black bag, prick a few holes in the plastic, sprinkle a bit of water, tie it up, and leave in the shade for a few months.