

**Natural Area Preservation**

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**PARK NEIGHBORS AND**  
**YARD WASTE**

**What is happening?**

**A Pile of a Problem**

Park staff are seeing a growing problem in city parks—yard waste! Many areas are being degraded by homeowners or landscape contractors who are dumping trimmings, clippings, and cuttings onto park lands. The problem is of particular concern in our natural areas.

**The Natural Cycle**

Natural areas have a cycle of leaf litter and grasses, twigs and branches, and even fallen trees decomposing and returning to the soil. Both new and existing plants then take up these nutrients from the soil as they grow. Naturally occurring processes such as fire and flooding contribute to the cycle. Fires quickly break down materials and release nutrients, while floods transport materials and nutrients. Generally, natural systems can handle only as much debris and nutrients as they produce internally without becoming overloaded.

**Why is yard waste a problem?**

**Overload**

A natural system can be thrown out of balance when excess materials are added. This is what happens when yard waste is dumped into a natural area. While materials from yards are natural or organic (composed of grass clippings, leaves, and trimmings from trees or shrubs), they were not produced by the system in which they are disposed. Dumping yard waste in a natural area with the intention that the pile will decompose and return nutrients back to the land may seem like the right thing, but it isn't. These piles take years to decompose. They smother and kill any plants they cover. Garden seeds, pests, chemicals, and excess heat from the decomposition process are introduced into the natural community, causing unforeseen havoc on that site. Besides being unsightly and encouraging others to dump their waste there, dumping on park property is illegal and subject to fines of up to \$500 (Chapter 26 of the City Code). The dumping of yard waste also interferes with stewardship of the park. Piles of waste create large amounts of smoke and may cause large, hazardous fires during prescribed ecological burns. Yard waste has the potential to introduce non-native, invasive plants into a park natural area, as well.

# F A C T S H E E T

## PARK NEIGHBORS AND YARD WASTE

### **What should I do with my yard waste?**

#### **Backyard composting**

Trimnings, leaves, and clippings are a valuable resource to your yard. Just as natural systems have a cycle of decomposition and release of nutrients, so can your yard. Backyard composting allows you to accelerate decomposition and thereby hasten the release of nutrients back into your garden or lawn. Setting up an area for composting is easy, and maintaining the compost pile takes a relatively short amount of time. Two keys to success are putting small pieces into the pile and turning the compost periodically. All your questions about composting can be answered by Project Grow, at 734•996•3169, or by the Washtenaw County MSU Extension at 734•997•1678

#### **City Composting Program**

You can have your yard compostables picked up through the city's curbside collection program or drop them at the city's drop-off station (734•971•7400 ext. 4). Call the staff at the Solid Waste Department at 734•994•2807 for more information about either of these programs.

### **Who cares for park natural areas?**

#### **Natural Area Preservation**

Natural Area Preservation of the City of Ann Arbor Field Operations Unit is charged with caring for all natural areas that are part of the city's park system. Park natural areas have been inventoried by staff and volunteers to document plants, frogs, toads, butterflies, and breeding birds found at each site. Based on this information, Natural Area Preservation (NAP) has developed stewardship plans to help us protect and restore these sensitive sites. Staff and hundreds of community volunteers implement these plans. The plans often call for removing non-native, invasive plants, reintroducing natural processes such as fire, and monitoring the health of the natural community.

### **What can I do to help my neighborhood natural area?**

There are a few simple things you can do at home to help protect your neighborhood natural area. Keep yard projects separate from the natural area behind your home. Don't extend your yard into the woods. Avoid storing equipment, tables, and wood piles beyond your property edge. Enjoy the natural area as it is; don't cut trees or brush and be careful not to create new trails in the park. As you plan for upcoming landscaping projects, consider using plants native to southeastern Michigan. Natural Area Preservation has brochures available to help you with your landscaping choices. NAP also has many volunteer opportunities in local natural areas. Call NAP offices at 734•794•6627 for more information about native landscaping brochures or volunteering.