

# There's a treasure hoard outside your house

by Sabine Eiche

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One of my uncles was an art restorer in southern Germany. He worked mainly in churches, restoring paintings and sculptures that glittered with gilding, that is with layers of gold. I watched him once, restoring a gilded frame. The process involved applying gold leaf, which comes in packets of 25 leaves separated by tissue paper. Each gold leaf is about 1/300,000 of an inch thick. To detach one leaf, he'd blow on it softly. It would waft in the air, and he'd catch it, everything happening as though in slow motion.

The vision of that gold leaf momentarily suspended in the air keeps running through my mind these days. The linden tree in the front yard is shedding its foliage, releasing thousands of gold leaves that float and glide earthwards, just like those thin sheets of gold used by artists and restorers.

When we think of gold, the first thing to come to mind is, of course, the metal, called "aurum" in Latin. The English word gold has nothing to do with the Latin "aurum," but derives instead from the Proto-Indo-European root for the colour yellow, "ghel."

Gold, as everyone knows, is one of the most precious metals. In describing these autumnal leaves as golden I'm referring to their yellow colour, obviously, but I'm also hinting at their – less obvious, to many of us – preciousness, or to put it another way, their value.

Before I had a garden, I considered fallen leaves a nuisance. It seemed to take forever to rake and bag them, and no sooner had I finished than more leaves speckled the lawn. Then, a few years ago, I stored a plastic bag stuffed with

leaves behind the shed and promptly forgot about it. This past spring, when I was preparing the garden beds for planting, I found the leaf bag and opened it. Inside was a mass that had the colour and texture of fine coffee grounds, and it was teeming with small, wriggling red worms. The presence of the worms told me it was good stuff. But it wasn't until I attended a workshop on soil, given by Egan Davis at Van Dusen Gardens, that I realized just how good my forgotten bag of leaves was.

Davis showed us how to analyze the texture and structure of our garden soil. I was pleased to learn that mine had excellent structure, meaning it's well aggregated, a term referring to the way the soil particles hang together. All this is crucial for the nutrients in the soil.

We finished the workshop shuffling through the fallen leaves at Van Dusen Gardens. Davis repeatedly told us that deciduous leaves were the best mulch for keeping the soil healthy. My thoughts went to my great storehouse of potential mulch back home. I was hoarding a treasure.

Believe me, those golden leaves strewn across yards and parks are like a guaranteed, high-profit investment, only better, because they'll give you 100% interest. Gather them up and let them sit somewhere, undisturbed, for a couple of years, and you will reap a benefit that is incalculable. And the best part is – all that gold is yours for free.