

# Five things to do with... autumn leaves

Autumn leaves are an excellent found resource. *Julie Mountain* offers some ideas on making the most of them in your setting

Summer may have been somewhat fleeting this year, but warm rainy days mean we're in for spectacular autumn colours. The smells, shades and textures of autumn simply demand outdoor play, and there is so much for children to enjoy in just rushing through the leaves, or throwing them into the air and feeling them flutter back down on their faces.

These quick, easy and inexpensive ideas for making the most of the season require little more than a huge pile of gorgeous, crunchy leaves.

## 1. LEAF CROWNS AND WREATHS

Collect large, colourful autumn leaves, and if necessary allow them to dry out for a few hours between sheets of newspaper. Once dry, arrange the leaves along a 5cm band of card that will wrap around the child's head. The leaves can be attached with a glue-stick, but a long strip of double-sided tape makes the activity easier for toddlers to participate in and speeds up the creative process. Join the ends of the crown with staples or more double-sided tape.

Wreaths require a similar process: cut the middle out of a paper plate, leaving the fluted edges intact – using a paper plate gives a more 3D effect. Arrange the leaves around the border and then attach to the plate as above. Punch a hole through the fluted edge to fasten a length of string and hang the wreaths together.

## 2. LEAF CONFETTI

Use hole punches and craft 'shape' punches (sometimes called stamps) to make leaf confetti. The 'punching'



Leaves are tactile and versatile



**Autumn leaves can be used for play, art and maths activities**

action is great for building up strength and resilience in the fingers, wrist and forearm, and the resulting confetti is fun for messy play, or for creating mosaics, collages and greeting cards. If you don't have stamps or punches, dry leaves can be cut with scissors or crumbled for a 'natural glitter' effect.

## 3. LEAF LANTERN

You'll need Camembert boxes, greaseproof paper, PVA glue, small leaves and battery-operated tea lights. For each lantern, cut two lengths of greaseproof paper that will fit inside the cheese box base; they'll need to be around 38cm long and 15-20cm tall.

Glue the leaves onto one sheet of the greaseproof paper, leaving plenty of

space for the light to get through. Glue the second sheet over the leaves, then roll it so that it fits neatly into the base of the cheese box; glue it in place and allow to dry.

Take the circular lid out of the top of the cheese box and punch three or four holes in the 'ring' that's left over. Staple or glue the ring around the top of your greaseproof lantern and insert string or wire through the holes. Place the tea light in the base and you're ready to go!

## 4. LEAF MATHS

There are endless opportunities to explore and embed maths concepts using collected leaves: sorting by size; sorting by shade or tone; collecting two leaves with two edges, five leaves with five lobes (for example, horse chestnut), nine leaves with nine points (for example, holly); matching shape, size or colour; writing numbers on leaves to create a number trail outdoors; estimating leaf numbers (how many in that pile/on that tree/in my hands?). Juliet Robertson's new book, *Messy Maths* (Independent Thinking Press), has hundreds of outdoor maths ideas for early years.

## 5. COMPOST

If you plan to grow veggies next spring, consider composting some of your leaves now to make a nutrient-rich leaf mulch to place over the soil. It will prevent weed growth and feed your precious plants.

Instructions for creating a compost heap from old pallets can easily be found online, but plastic composters are inexpensive and easy to maintain. Leaves are worms' favourite food, so remember to visit the compost heap regularly to watch the worm population do its work. ■

## RISKS... AND BENEFITS

There are a few hazards to look out for when collecting autumn leaves. Before allowing children to collect armfuls of leaves, check for:

- Dog (or fox) poo! Autumn leaves can disguise animal faeces and if your outdoor space is prone to this (or you're out in the park), sifting through the leaves with a stick will help avoid unpleasant accidents.
- Hedgehogs. Later in autumn, hedgehogs are

starting to think about hibernation and can sometimes be found, even during the day, in quiet leaf piles. Finding a hedgehog will be very exciting – but remember they are timid creatures and won't appreciate being handled or squealed at.

- Clogged drains. If you're creating a huge leaf pile (for leaping in or throwing), make sure it's located well away from drains and grates.