

## Removal of leaves loses ground to mulching

By Claribel Ortega

REGION — With most of the trees in the Rivertowns still bare, it's hard to imagine a time when the leaves will begin falling again, starting the yearly tradition of raking, blowing, and carting leaves away, one large tarp or yard waste bag at a time. But last Friday, local landscapers, public works officials, and homeowners gathered at the Greenburgh Nature Center in Scarsdale to learn about the benefits of onsite mulching. The program was part of the "Your Leaves ... Love 'Em and Leave 'Em" initiative spearheaded by the Village of Irvington.

The expense of gathering and disposing of leaves can be quite high, as stated in an e-mail from Mark Gilliland to the Enterprise promoting the GNC event. He wrote: "In 2009, the Village of Irvington spent \$30,000 in leaf tipping fees alone and estimates total leaf costs to be over \$100,000 each year. The Village of Tarrytown estimates total leaf management costs for 2010 at \$175,640." It was also estimated that the Town of Greenburgh spent between \$300,000 and \$400,000 for leaf removal.

Gilliland, a member of the Irvington Green Policy Task Force, was one of the speakers at last Friday's event. "The problem we see every day in the fall is leaves on the street and leaves into the storm drain," Gilliland told a packed room of more than 30 people as they watched his power point presentation.

Gilliland noted that leaves in the street create unsafe driving conditions and add runoff pollution to waterways. "If you're doing mulching in place, you're really saving yourself time, you're saving yourself money in terms of not just labor but in terms of other resources, such as dumping fees and gasoline," said Gilliland. Gilliland's presentation also stressed that mulching reduced the need for commercial fertilizers, is easier and faster than traditional methods of leaf removal, returns nutrients to lawns and landscape beds, and "eliminates or reduces yard waste from entering the municipal waste stream."

Tim Downey of Hastings-based Aesthetic Landscape Care took the floor after Gilliland, explaining how his early experiences with leaf removal lead to his current approach of mulching leaves where they fall. Downey said he began looking into alternative practices concerning leaf removal roughly 10 years ago when he decided that he wanted to develop his company in a different way and cut down on his manpower. "I do not mean to stand up here and be preachy," he said at the beginning of his presentation, adding, "I've made all these mistakes. I was the noisiest person around."

Downey began the process of implementing the mulching method by shredding leaves, and then eventually cataloging how long it took him to dispose of leaves rather than mulching. According to Downey, mulching took 60 to 70 percent of the time that disposing of leaves did. "At the end of the day the customer cares about really two things: Does my property look good? And what's my relationship with my contractor?" said Downey, who said that in the long run, mulching in place made his clients' properties better. Like Gilliland, Downey cited the cost savings involved with mulching, mentioning that Westchester County spends \$8 million a year in transferring material, half



CLARIBEL ORTEGA/RIVERTOWNS ENTERPRISE

Landscaper Anthony Vulpone demonstrates a mulching machine.



JIM MACLEAN/RIVERTOWNS ENTERPRISE

Tim Downey of Aesthetic Landscape Care talks to attendees.

of which he estimates to be leaves.

Today, Downey is one of several local landscapers using the mulching approach, grinding up leaves where they fall with devices like "The Vulture 2," which traps grass and leaves and mulches them down until they are powder-like in consistency. According to Downey, mulching also helps reduce noise pollution because leaf blowers are only used sparingly, if at all.

In addition to Downey, landscapers Sean Ryan of Ryan & Ryan Landscapers in Hastings, Michael Bellantoni of Michael Bellantoni Inc. in White Plains, and Anthony Vulpone of A. Vulpone Landscaping and Lawn Maintenance, who also gave a mulching demonstration after the presentation, were all on hand to share their personal experiences with onsite mulching. Ryan said that by mulching, his company saves \$1,000 a week between dumping costs and overtime.

"They love it! I'm saving them money and the people are really, really happy," said Vulpone of his clients' response to mulching.

Dennis Montaruli the assistant general foreman of the Irvington Department of Public Works, also attended the presentation, and Irvington Parks Department Foreman Chris DePaoli spoke briefly, giving an overview of the current mulching efforts by his crew. "It works for Irvington," said DePaoli, noting that the

absorption of water and grass in Irvington parks has improved since the Village implemented mulching. DePaoli also said that although there are many benefits to mulching leaves where they fall, more maintenance is involved for contractors who employ the practice.

In addition to holding the workshop to help spread the word about leaf mulching, the task force created bookmarks for homeowners and landscapers with the basic process of mulching and its benefits. They also created a pocket card with similar information in English and in Spanish for business owners and their workers to use, as well as a sign for landscapers and homeowners to put on lawns with the words "Love 'Em and Leave 'Em" and the homepage for the initiative, [www.irvingtonny.gov/green](http://www.irvingtonny.gov/green).

Dealing with leaves is a "process, not an event," said Downey, addressing the crowd and offering to help demonstrate the benefits of mulching in place in other villages.

All those involved in the workshop hope to not only educate the public and municipalities about the financial benefits of mulching, but also to underscore the environmental advantages of the natural fertilizers.

"You should employ Mother Nature as much as you can," said Downey of the mulching process, driving his point across with the plainspoken defense that "Leaves are not a sin."

FROM THE EDITOR

## Mulch some more

Suburbanites seem to be stuck in a never-ending struggle with Mother Nature.

Raccoons and skunks make a mess of suburban garbage cans. Canada Geese deposit their droppings all over suburban parks, especially along the Hudson. Deer snack on suburban gardens while serving as taxi cabs for Lyme-infected ticks.

To combat these scourges, suburbanites resort to all sorts of questionable, and sometimes expensive, tactics.

In the Rivertowns, for example, coyote dummies and actual dogs have been used in attempts to scare off geese. Despite such efforts, the birds continue to populate local parks.

To deal with deer, both hunting and birth control have been considered during the past year. Hastings officials decided to pursue immunization, though they've yet to announce a plan to implement that method. In Dobbs Ferry, meanwhile, officials are weighing all options, as reported last week.

While those issues remain unresolved, a suitable solution has been found for another problem.

For years and years, suburbanites have debated how best to round up the leaves that clutter yards every fall. The debate has centered on the use of gas powered blowers — so much so that municipalities restricted the use such machines in recent years, though enforcement of those rules remains a subject of scrutiny.

In recent months, however, the ad nauseam back-and-forth about blowers has given way to more constructive initiative. Thanks to an effort that started in Irvington, mulching has proven to be both eco-friendly and cost-effective, especially for landscapers and other large landowners.

The practice of shredding leaves in place was promoted last fall by the Irvington Green Policy Task Force. One Hastings neighborhood then latched onto the "love 'em and leave 'em" concept with a mass collection and mulching effort. Now, as reported on Page 1, the method is gaining practitioners thanks to continued promotion.

The story outlines the multiple virtues of mulching. The cost savings alone should be enough to convince anyone — treehugger or not — that this practice should be adopted by every landscaper, municipality and school district. Paying tens of thousands of dollars or more to dispose of leaves is ridiculous.

Mulching, of course, does not help with deer and geese. But checking one problem off the list is a notable start.