Yard Waste Management

Education Overview for Yard Waste Management
Many homeowners are guilty of sweeping or blowing yard waste, like grass clippings and fallen tree leaves, in the street or down the storm drain. When it rains, yard waste left in streets, on sidewalks, or in driveways will wash into nearby storm drains. Once in the storm drain system, the yard waste can enter local bodies of water without being treated or cleaned. While grass clippings, tree leaves, and other yard waste are natural, they still pollute our local waterways. As yard waste breaks down or decomposes in a local creek, stream, river, or lake, it depletes the oxygen in the water. Aquatic life, such as fish, need oxygen to survive. If oxygen levels become too low, fish and other aquatic life cannot survive. If grass clippings and tree leaves are washed or dumped down a storm drain, the storm drain may become clogged. The next time that it rains, or yard irrigation runs off into the street, the water that would normally flow down the storm drain will be blocked by the yard waste. This can cause flooding.

How to Properly Handle Yard Waste
"Leaving it on the lawn" and "Don't Bag It!" methods aim to recycle your yard waste – and its nutrients – back into your landscape. This may reduce your need for chemical fertilizers. The rule of thumb for mowing the lawn is remove no more than one-third of the grass surface at any one time. Grass clippings left on the lawn do not contribute to thatch, but return valuable nutrients to the soil. They contain about four percent nitrogen, 0.5 percent phosphorus, and about two percent potassium, as well as the necessary minor elements plants need. During the fall, you may not need to rake your leaves and collect them. Instead, you could mow them! A light covering of leaves can be mowed without the catch-bag attachment, leaving the shredded leaves on the lawn. This technique is most effective when a mulching mower is used

Mulching is a simple and effective way to recycle leaves and improve your landscape. It reduces evaporation from the soil surface, inhibits weed growth, moderates soil temperatures, keeps soils from eroding and crusting, and prevents soil compaction. As organic mulch decomposes, valuable nutrients are released for use by plants. Leaves can be used as mulch in vegetable gardens, flowerbeds, and around shrubs and trees. As an option to raking, a lawnmower with the catch-bag attachment provides a fast and easy way to shred and collect the leaves. Leaves that have been mowed or run through a shredder will decompose faster and are more likely to remain in place than unshredded leaves.

Leaves may be collected and worked directly into garden and flowerbed soils. A six- to eight-inch layer of leaves tilled into a heavy, clay soil will improve aeration and drainage. The same amount tilled into a light, sandy soil will improve water and nutrient holding capacity. In vegetable gardens and annual planting beds, collect and work leaves into the soil during the fall. This allows sufficient time for the leaves to decompose prior to spring planting.

Composting can be used to: enrich the soil by adding nutrients, loosen tight, heavy soils, help sandy soils retain moisture and nutrients, add to potting soils for container grown plants, and mulch around landscape plants and gardens. Bacteria, fungi, beneficial nematodes, mites, springtails, wolf spiders, and other beneficial insects break down organic materials into the rich, soil-like material known as compost.

Websites/Additional Information
Texas Commission on Environmental Quality: www.tceq.texas.gov/permitting/stormwater
Environmental Protection Agency: www.water.epa.gov
North Central Texas Council of Governments: http://www.nctcog.org/envir/SEEclean/stormwater/index.asp
City of Rockwall Storm Water Management: http://www.rockwall.com/Stormwater/index.asp