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A call for an end to leaf burning

Daily Herald Editorial Board

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At a time when no one can smoke a cigarette in any public building or within 15 feet of its entrance, how is it that those of us living in some suburban areas still can burn leaves?

The smoky haze hanging in the autumn air virtually imprisons many people indoors on glorious fall weekends.

The health risks of leaf burning are clear, and it's time to ban it in residential neighborhoods.

Many towns do, and DuPage County prohibits leaf burning in unincorporated areas. Leaders of many other towns and counties continue to debate the issue or avoid it entirely on the nostalgic premise that it's the way autumn ought to smell or in the belief that there's no other reasonable way to dispose of leaves.

Yet, those piles of leaves pose a real danger once they meet with a match.

Leaf smoke contains carbon monoxide, carcinogens and tiny particles that settle deep into the lungs and remain for months or years, reducing how much air you can inhale and increasing the risk of respiratory infection, reports the American Lung Association in Greater Chicago.

People with asthma - one in 12 children and one in 15 adults - are more likely to suffer attacks. In people with heart disease, exposure to particles in smoke for as little as one hour has been linked to irregular heartbeats and heart attacks.

One burning leaf pile can force susceptible people all over the neighborhood to stay indoors. That's enough reason for you to ban the bonfire, even if your area doesn't prohibit the practice.

There's no doubt leaf-raking season is difficult if you have one of the large wooded yards common to unincorporated areas. Burning is a straightforward way to handle a yard ankle-deep in leaves, but it's not the only way. Other options, courtesy of the McHenry County Department of Health, include:

- Mulching. Shred a layer of leaves and leave them on your lawn or move them to cover planting beds.
- Composting. You'll produce plenty of organic material to enrich your garden. Find out how at www.epa.gov/compost.
- Pickup. Most residential waste haulers will remove yard waste, and coordinating with neighbors or a neighborhood association can reduce costs.

Or follow the lead of the Lake County Forest Preserve District and simply blow the leaves into natural, non-lawn areas of the yard.

Foregoing the fire might mean learning a new way to do things. But the bottom line is inconvenience or nostalgia for that autumn smell are not good arguments when someone's health is at stake.