

Shelton-Mason County Journal - Dedicated to the citizens of Mason County, Washington since 1886

Rising from ashes

Peninsula Permaculture · December 31, 2020 · Page A-14



By Alex Féthière

Photo in the print edition: Wood ash with charcoal in it both offers and stores nutrients. (Photo courtesy of Kathy Ross)

Henry David Thoreau wrote that firewood warms twice: when it's chopped and when it's burned. It might warm a third time as we consume calories from plants nourished by wood ash.

Wood ash has been documented enhancing human life since the Romans and Aztecs. Whether it's the indigenous swidden practice of "slash-and-burn" horticulture, the ancient Roman application of wood ash to agricultural fields, or the Aztecs' "terra preta do indio" (Portuguese: black soil of the Indian), it's a component of countless fertility regimes.

Three million tons of it are produced annually in the United States. Eighty percent of wood ash produced in the Northeast is land applied. It makes particular sense for us in Washington because of the alkalizing effect it has on our often-acidic soils, and it has a particular affinity for clay soil.

Its other uses have largely been superseded by industry: lye production, glass/metal polish, insect repellent, soap and dye making, even saltpeter for gunpowder. Many readers are accumulating this valuable resource as I write this, and its judicious use perpetuates a tradition of recycling and rebirth.

Hardwoods produce up to three times more ash than soft, and up to a third more calcium. Twenty to forty percent of wood ash's composition is calcium carbonate, which accounts for its rapid liming of soils. This effect spikes and tapers quicker than that of agricultural lime.

Magnesium and potassium are among its score of other important components. Average wood ash has a value of 0-1-3 NPK. Potash (potassium) from wood ash was economically important enough that an improved extraction for it was protected by the United States' first patent.

Because wood ash for pH needs time to work on the soil, it is best scattered in winter as it's produced. I stop application three months before the last frost date so that it won't inhibit seedlings.

Some of it should be stored for routine application throughout the year. As with all soil amendments this storage should exclude rain to prevent leaching of nutrients. I keep it in sealed garbage bags or cans and benefit from friends donating theirs.

Be sure you can trust your sources. Some folks burn coal, briquets, lumber or trash and the heavy metals and pollutants in nonfirewood materials are bad for you and your plants.

I sprinkle a 1-inch layer of wood ash over each installment to the compost heap to help keep the acidity neutral, which composting microorganisms prefer. It also makes a handy additive to compost and fertilizer teas over the year.

You should test your soil periodically to see how much wood ash you can safely apply. Raising pH beyond 7 will reduce bioavailability of macro- and micronutrients. Garlic, chives, leeks, lettuces, stone-fruit trees and particularly asparagus enjoy top-dressing with wood ash.

Its value as a slug deterrent is notable, but don't let too much collect on the leaves because it can burn them. Because it's only effective when dry (that is, rarely!) I combine wood ash with ground eggshells, coffee grounds and Epsom salts as a barrier.

ADDENDUM: My past columns about Archangel Ancient Tree Archive have inundated Dave Pearsall with requests for giant sequoias and coast redwoods. I'm helping the organization by distributing some trees in the Harstine Island area. If you'd like some, write me at the email below.

■ *Alex Féthière has lived on Harstine Island long enough to forget New York City, where he built community gardens and double-dug his suburban sod into a victory garden. He can be reached at onlandist@gmail.com.*

Originally published in the print edition of the Shelton-Mason County Journal, December 31, 2020, page A-14.

Transcribed from the page scan in the SmallTownPapers archive: <https://smc.stparchive.com/Archive/SMC/SMC12312020P14.php>