

The Green Thumb

Lawn and Garden News You Can Use

December 2008

Using Wood Ash in the Garden

Elizabeth Wahle, horticulture specialist

If you have a supply of wood ashes, you may be wondering about using it as a fertilizer or soil amendment. Wood ashes from your fireplace or wood stove can be beneficial to soils in home gardens and plant beds, but they must be properly applied. Wood ash contains potassium, which can be a good natural fertilizer.

Depending on species, wood ash can contain anywhere from 3 to 10 percent potassium, with hardwood ash containing more potassium than those from softwood.



However, when water comes in contact with wood ashes, it forms potassium hydroxide. This compound is highly alkaline and can rapidly raise soil pH. For this reason, wood ash should be viewed as a liming material and used carefully. Wood ashes should not be applied to high pH soils (> 6.5). Generally, for soils that can benefit from raising the soil pH, two to three times as much wood ash is needed to raise the soil pH compared to using limestone for the same purpose. Yet unlike limestone, which can take six months or more to take effect, wood ash has high water solubility and quickly changes the soil pH. It is a good policy to test your soil annually and make adjustments accordingly.

For soils that can benefit from raising the pH and additions of potassium, a few guidelines should be followed. Never use more than 20 pounds per 1000 square feet because toxicity problems could result from excessive usage. If the soil is in the proper pH range, this rate of application is considered appropriate for yearly treatments. After wood ash application, no additional lime should be needed. Apply ashes evenly and, if possible, mix them into the soil. Don't leave ashes in lumps or piles on the soil surface, which is equivalent to dumping large amounts of lime in a small area. Wood ashes should not come into contact with germinating seedlings or plant roots, which could result in root damage. Because ashes that settle on foliage can cause burning, thoroughly rinse plants after applying ashes. Don't use wood ashes around acid-loving plants such as azaleas, rhododendrons, and blueberries. Certain types of ash should be avoided. Avoid coal or charcoal ashes, as well as ashes from lead-painted or chemically-treated wood. Not only will nutrients remain in the ash, but the toxins will as well.

Use caution when applying wood ash to garden soils or plant beds. A measured application can be beneficial to increase the soil pH and add potassium, but an over-application can increase the likelihood of soil-related problems.

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Extending Poinsettia Life

David Robson, horticulture educator



With proper care, your holiday poinsettia plant can bring pleasure for weeks or even months after the holiday season ends.

House temperatures, as well as light and humidity levels, affect the length of time the plant will remain attractive.

First brought to this country from Mexico in 1825, the poinsettia has long been the traditional Christmas potted plant. Red-flowered forms are the most popular, but white, pink, and variegated pink and white varieties are also grown.

Most of the newer poinsettia varieties retain their leaves and bracts remarkably well and may stay in good shape for several months. Yet, poinsettias are sensitive to drafts, too cool or too warm temperatures, sudden temperature changes, dry atmosphere, improper watering, and light.

These adverse conditions can cause loss of leaves and withering of bracts—those showy, colored structures commonly called 'flowers.' The true flowers are actually the yellow, nubby parts tucked down in the center of each whorl of bracts.

Poinsettias like a uniform room temperature between 60 and 68 degrees during the day and 10 degrees cooler at night. Humidity levels of 20 to 50 percent are ideal, though these may be difficult to achieve in the winter with the furnace drying out the air.

Group the plants together or place them on water-filled trays of pebbles to increase humidity levels. Temperatures above 75 degrees are detrimental, particularly in a dry atmosphere.

The plant should be placed near a bright window, just out of direct sunlight, or be provided with 14 hours of artificial light. If windows leak cold air, move the plants farther back.

It has been said that more plants are killed or damaged by 'drowning' than anything else. Plants need air as well as water, so avoid over-watering.

Learn to gauge the moisture content of the soil by its color and feel. As the surface dries, it gets light-colored. Pots also feel lighter. When soil is too dry, it becomes firm and sometimes cracked; when the soil is saturated, it feels slimy and sticky. With experience, you'll learn to find the ideal moisture condition.

Soil moisture should be maintained at moderate and uniform levels, neither soggy-wet nor bone-dry.

And, never let the pot stand in water for any extended period of time. If the plant came wrapped in foil or other watertight material, punch holes in the bottom or remove the wrap entirely so water won't be trapped inside.

Poinsettia plants can be cut back by half in mid-March to encourage new shoots. Poinsettias can be placed outside in the spring after danger of frost has passed and brought indoors in mid-September to early October to force into bloom.

On the other hand, there is nothing wrong with relegating the poinsettia to the compost pile once all the leaves have fallen and you've enjoyed it to its fullest.

Question Corner

Answers provided by David Robson, U of I Extension horticulture educator

Q. We have two Bradford trees. One is a regular Bradford, the other is a Cleveland. The Cleveland is still green with all its leaves. The regular turned red many months ago and now all the leaves are gone. This is the first time the leaves have been red. Both of these trees are about four years old. Is this normal for the red tree or has it been damaged by the unusual weather we have had this year? Almost all the Bradfords in our town still have full leaves. Thank you for your help.

A. Bradford and Cleveland are two different cultivars of ornamental pears; the latter is not a form of the Bradford. As a group, Bradford pears tend to have more of an upright, tight growth habit, making them extremely susceptible to breaking during wind and ice storms. For that reason, they are no longer one of the highly recommended trees. Cleveland pears tend to be more rounded with a greater angle between branches, which helps with wind and ice/snow loads.

Ornamental pears as a group are hard to figure out and are seldom consistent with bloom and fall coloration from year to year, unlike many of our trees. Growing location and weather environments can have a big impact on coloration, as well as the plant's genetics. Rain, temperature, and light all have an effect on fall coloration as well as leaf retention. Personally, I would want leaves to turn color and drop. Several years ago, a Thanksgiving ice storm did a number on the trees that still had leaves clinging to their branches.

Be thankful that the tree has lost its leaves and don't worry about it.

Q. I have three fire bushes that have the beautiful red leaves in the fall. However, my bushes only get a few leaves at the top that turn red and most of them just fall. My question is: Am I trimming them at the wrong time of year or trimming them too much so they don't turn? I usually trim them during the summer months. I would appreciate your input.

A. The name "fire bush" is a bit of a problem. We're assuming that it is a burning bush or a corky-winged euonymus. The other option is a firethorn, which is a *Pyracantha*, a member of the rose family that produces orange berries and seldom a good fall foliage color.

Fall color with burning bushes (*Euonymus*) is dependent on weather, soil conditions, light, and new growth. Plants need full sun and less stress to produce good fall color. Pruning in the summer is usually not a recommended practice for most ornamentals because it puts undue stress on the plant, and it produces new growth that might not mature before winter, causing dieback.

The best time to prune *Euonymus* is when it is dormant, somewhere between December and mid-March. Prune limbs back to the crotches of other branches... just don't top or shear the plants. Try to maintain a natural shape as much as possible.

If the plant is shaded, that might account for some lack of color; you'll have to decide if you can provide more light by thinning nearby plants to let in more light. However, that might not be realistic. If you want consistent fall color, consider *Itea* or *Sweetspire*, a great semi-evergreen shrub, though it does sucker.



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Making Your Own Holiday Wreath

Ed Billingsley, guest columnist



There is something special about making Christmas decorations. You may have some handmade ornaments from children or grandchildren that bring back fond memories of holidays gone by.

A wreath is another decoration that adds a nice touch to your home. Telling friends and relatives that you designed the wreath on the door or hanging over the mantel begins instant conversation.

Making your own holiday wreath is not hard. You can start with a circular frame from a garden center or bend your own from some wire coat hangers.

Pack the wire frame with florist's moss and tie the moss in place with green string or small florist wire.

Now add foliage such as pine or holly in layers until the moss is covered.

Next, select pine cones, holly berries, or other decorations of choice to accent the foliage. The color accent can even include poinsettias or roses. You can attach the decorations with florist wire or hot glue. With heavier items such as pine cones, wire may be a better choice. The design can be completed with a ribbon.

Add a wire on the back to allow the wreath to be hung.

Let your creativity bloom by making your own Christmas wreath this holiday season!



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