

Wood Ashes from the Fireplace

Solid Waste Management Fact Sheet No. 14

Wood ashes from the fireplace don't have to be a disposal problem, consider recycling them into the yard as part of a fertilizer program. Ashes from your fireplace or woodstove are a valuable product in terms of potash. If you bought ashes as a commercial fertilizer, bagged and ready to use, the bag would be marked 0-1.5-8. Remember, the figures on the bag indicate nitrogen (N) phosphorus (P) and potassium (K). The last figure represents the percentage of potassium or potash in the bag, this varies from 1 to 10.

Wood ashes contain up to 70 percent calcium carbonate, as well as potassium, phosphorus, and many trace elements. Other ways to replace calcium and potash from lime is with crushed eggshells, bonemeal, or wood ashes.

Wood ashes are very alkaline, and since they have a very fine particle size, they act as a fast-acting liming material. Lime and ashes raise the pH of the soil, so use wood ashes in moderation to avoid those high pH levels. Microorganism are unable to break down organic matter in high alkaline soils. Some plants find it difficult to take up nutrients when the soil has a higher pH. These are all reasons not to spread ashes heavily in one spot.

Care must be taken not to put ashes where acid loving plants are located, or where you plan to grow plants that like soil on the acid side like potatoes, blueberries and azaleas. Ashes may be used in a flower bed or new area to be planted if the pH is to high.

The most important thing, prior to adding anything to the soil is to have the soil tested to see what the pH is. If liming is required, limit applications of ashes to 10 pounds per 100 square

feet. At this rate, your soil will get the benefits of the trace minerals without adverse effects on pH. Before planting the area, work the ashes into the top 2 or 3 inches of soil. Wood ashes should only be applied every 2 to 3 years in any particular area.

Wood ashes were used by old-timers who tossed them through their trees when the dew was on in the morning. They claimed this controlled disease and insect problems, and was a good fertilizer as well. While this may be a bit of an exaggeration, it may serve as a repellent because many insects don't like gritty textures under foot like slugs.

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