

Use Of Fireplace Ashes

The use of fireplace ashes is a rather complicated subject. While it is commendable to recycle any and all possible waste materials back into the environment, applying ashes should only be done with considerable forethought and planning.

First, ashes resulting from the burning of standard firewood vary as to chemical content. That content depends on the type of wood that was burned and how hot the fire. On average, ashes contain up to 22% undesirable chemical salts which may actually convert your soil to a high-salt area. This alone can make the soil plant unfriendly.

In addition, fireplace ashes are highly alkaline with an average pH of 11.6, which is in the range of household bleach. This reduces the acidity of the soil perhaps to a range unfavorable for most plants, especially vegetables. While there is some nutrient value in ashes (they contain about 6% potassium), most gardens that have been fertilized recently already have more than enough potassium. Further, ashes contain very little phosphorus and no nitrogen.

Consider that soils in Eastern Oklahoma on the whole are slightly acidic, but as you go west past Tulsa, the soils lose acidity and become alkaline. Given that, most ornamental plants and turf grasses prefer the acidity (or pH) of the soil to be neutral or slightly acidic. Most vegetables prefer slightly acidic soil. And, some plants, such as azaleas and blueberries, prefer the soil to be strongly acidic. So, adding ashes will tend to drive the soil pH in the wrong direction.

Always consider having a soil test performed before applying any fertilizer or ashes. Soil samples can be dropped off at the Tulsa County OSU Cooperative Extension Service located at 4116 East 15th Street in Tulsa. They will send them to OSU for analysis, which will perform a routine test for about \$10. If your soil test should indicate the need to make the soil less acidic (raise the pH) and/or if you need to correct for a potassium deficiency, ashes could be used. However, if you do add ashes to your soil, do not exceed 15 pounds per 1000 square feet of garden or lawn, and do this only once every 10 years.

Notwithstanding the above information, since the use of ashes can be complicated and the chance of damaging the soil is so great, it may be wise to forego the use of ashes in your garden or lawn altogether. For further information on the usage of ashes, please refer to the Tulsa Master Gardener's website and search for OSU's Fact Sheet PSS-2238 titled "Fireplace Ashes for Lawn and Garden Use".