

WOOD ASH

If you're heating with wood, there's always plenty of wood ash to go around. Did you know there are many uses for wood ash?

Wood ash is little more than the remaining minerals after burning wood, and fireplace ashes contain calcium and all manner of other things that can be handy around the house, if used properly.

NATURAL ICE MELT

Probably one of the most practical uses for wood ash is to use it slowly over the course of the winter as ice melt. The natural minerals in wood ash work the same way as salt does to melt ice on driveways and walkways. Be careful using it near your front door though; tracking wood ash into the house makes a big mess.

NATURAL TOILET CLEANER

Wood ash is especially valuable as a toilet cleaner, not only because it polishes the bowl, but also because it won't harm septic systems.

CLEANING CLOUDY HEADLIGHTS

One of my readers told me they "make a rubbing paste from wood ashes and remove clouded headlights on a vehicle." It makes sense because road grit and the accumulated exhaust fumes from the car in front of you aren't that much different than dirty stove glass.

SILVER POLISH

In the same way that wood ash works to clean glass, it can also polish silver. Just dampen a towel and add a bit of wood ash before working some tarnished silver.

Wood ash is also commonly used to scour dishes in rural communities and while camping.

SKUNK ODOR REMOVER

Wood ashes naturally help neutralize skunk odor on pets. If an animal gets sprayed, dust them thoroughly with wood ash and leave them outside for a few hours before giving them a thorough bath.

While this method is likely effective to an extent and may have been important historically, these days there are many better options. If you have a skunk-sprayed animal, use wood ash if you have nothing else on hand, but I'd highly recommend keeping skunk-off spray and skunk-off pet shampoo.

HIDING STAINS ON PAVING

Wood ash is naturally grey, and it can help cover up stains on sidewalks and paving. Simply dust a bit on and scuff it in with your boot.

CLEANING OIL SPILLS

In the same way that wood ash can be used to hide stains on concrete, it can absorb oil spills to help prevent them in the first place.

COCKROACH REPELLANT

Spreading a bit of ash in dark corners of the house or under appliances will keep roaches out. Their hard outer shell doesn't stand up well to wood ash, and it'll keep them from setting up shop in your house.

SMELL ABSORBER

Similar to baking soda, wood ash can help absorb odors around the house. Try adding a small jar to the fridge to absorb odors. It works even better if there are small pieces of charcoal still left in the ashes to help out.

DESICCANT

Wood ash can be used to absorb humidity and help prevent moist areas from developing mold. Place a cup of wood ashes in a damp cupboard or basement room. Again, small chunks of charcoal left in the ashes help for this purpose.

GARDEN FERTILIZER

Wood ash contains all the trace minerals from inside a tree's wood, which are the building blocks needed for plant health. While it doesn't contain carbon or nitrogen, those are in ready supply from compost.

The University of Vermont recommends about 5 gallons of wood ash per 1,000 square feet of garden. Since wood ash will raise the pH of soils, it's not good for acid-loving crops like blueberries or potatoes.

BOOST COMPOST

A small amount of wood ash can help give compost piles a boost. While birds may be beautiful around a backyard compost pile, in rural areas open compost can attract bears. We've found that dusting a bit of wood ash on top of the pile helps keep bears and other large omnivores from digging in the scraps as well.

After we started adding wood ash to our compost, we noticed that it was markedly more healthy. Stick a hand into the middle of the pile, and you'll come out with a palm-full of hard-working worms actively converting everything into nutrient-rich compost.

CONTROL POND ALGAE

Since wood ash contains micronutrients that plants need to thrive, it can also help strengthen aquatic plants. The potassium in wood ash can boost rooted aquatic plants in a pond, making them better able to compete with algae. That in turn, slows the growth of algae in a pond. Be careful not to add too much.

PREVENTING PLANT FROST DAMAGE TO PLANTS

Dusting plants with wood ash before an early light frost can help prevent frost damage. It makes sense, as the mineral salts in wood ash would lower the freezing point of water without harming the plant tissues as other types of salt might.

PREVENT CALCIUM DEFICIENCY IN TOMATOES

Those ugly black spots on tomatoes are often the result of calcium deficiency. Eggshells and bone meal are often added to tomato planting holes to provide them with calcium, but wood ash can do the same job. Add about 1/4 cup of wood ash to each tomato planting hole and scratch it into the soil before setting out transplants.

SLUG AND SNAIL REPELLANT

Creating a circle of wood ash around crops prevents slugs and snails from crossing into plant beds. We use this around our homegrown shiitake mushrooms, which are particularly susceptible to snails and slugs. It's also a good solution for leafy crops like lettuce. The wood ash barrier is only effective until it rains or the ash gets wet, which is unfortunate because you'll need to reapply regularly. The benefit, on the other hand, is that it'll wash off easily at harvest time.

NON-TOXIC ANT REPELLANT AROUND KIDS & PETS

Placing a pile of wood ash on top of an anthill gives them notice that they need to move their nest.

It won't kill the nest, but they will have to pack up and relocate, which works great for relocating ants' nests away from kids' play areas.

CHICKEN FEED SUPPLEMENT

Since wood ash is high in minerals, it can be good as a food supplement for chickens in small amounts. Community Chickens notes that "Wood ash offers calcium and potassium. Adding wood ash to your chicken feed (less than 1% ratio) may help to extend a hen's laying period and can help reduce the smell of chicken droppings." Be sure to use only ashes from clean burned wood and nothing treated if using for a food supplement.