

The wonders of wood (pot) ash

Janet Pollock has summarised a story from the ABC's Organic Gardener about wood ash. For those lucky enough to have a fire, you can create your own supply!

Wood ash produced from slow burning hardwood logs is a valuable soil conditioner. It contains anywhere from 25 to 45 percent calcium carbonate, depending on the timber that was used and the speed at which it was burnt, and can be safely used as a direct replacement for garden lime. In slightly acidic soil with a pH of about 6-6.5, apply the wood ash at a rate of a handful per square metre. However this rate can be adjusted depending on the natural pH of your soil. As much of our soil has been imported from other places the pH varies quite a lot so it's a good idea to check it from time to time.

The other major component of wood ash is potassium carbonate. Herein lies the source of the term "potash". The Dutch used to combine wood ash with water, and evaporate the solution in large steel pots until a white residue remained - literally "pot ash". Potassium is an essential plant nutrient. It has the role of thickening cell walls in the leaf, making a plant more resistant to pests, frosts and drought. It also enhances flower and fruit production, so edible gardeners need to be paying special attention to its use. (I assume edible gardeners refers to people who grown edible plants, not gardeners who are good enough to eat!)

To cover both the calcium and potassium bases in one go, throw around a handful of wood ash per square metre when preparing beds for the spring planting.

One plant that responds especially well to a handful of wood ash is the tomato. The potash helps produce lots of flowers and enhances the flavour of the fruit, while the calcium helps to prevent blossom end rot. Apply the wood ash just as the plant starts to flower.

So, if you have any ash from your fire, please bring it to the garden and we can put it in a bin for use in the Spring and Summer.