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Unless you are close to the fire, ash from the wildfires can be beneficial to your garden or landscape because it will provide phosphorus and potassium to plants. Simply rinse ash off leaves to remove, remembering to rinse both clean.

Ash from fires could help garden

Unless you live next to the fires, ash from the sky brings beneficial nutrients for your plants

Question: I’m concerned about my vegetable garden and landscape plants because of the effects of these prolonged wildfires. Does all this ash and smoke harm my plants, and are my fruits and vegetables safe to eat?

Answer: Due to the intensity and closeness of these local wildfires, the Master Gardener Plant Clinic has received some inquiries about this same concern. Smoke and ash have settled into the Umpqua Valley, exasperated by an inversion layer and it’s showing up by covering everything with a gray, gritty film.

The ash deposited by forest fires is relatively nontoxic, being similar to what you see in your woodstove or fireplace. However, if you live near an area where houses have been destroyed, this ash can be harmful as it can contain carcinogens from plastics, cars, building materials and other things incinerated by the flames.

In this case, you may consider discarding any fruits or

vegetables that may be covered in ash from burning homes to be on the safe side.

Otherwise, thoroughly rinsing your fruits and vegetables with clean water outside and then again in the kitchen sink should remove the ash and particulates that come with it. For a more thorough cleaning, you can soak your fruits and vegetables in a 10% white vinegar solution (1 teaspoon vinegar to 3 cups water). This solution will lift off ashy soil particles found especially on your leafy vegetables as well as fruits like peaches, apricots and nectarines.

If you have ash covering your soil, there should be no danger to the soil itself as ash provides readily available phosphorus and potassium to plants. With the winter rains approaching, they should lower the soil pH naturally. Again, if you are located close to the wildfire, there is more of a danger that your soil is contaminated.

You might consider having a soil test done on your garden site before next spring to determine



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Ask a Master Gardener

if any heavy metals or chemicals have seeped into the soil. There is also a concern for soil erosion if your property has lost trees and underbrush to the fires. Protect vulnerable soils from erosion by covering bare areas with mulch such as straw until plants can return or you replant.

Soil with too much ash covering it may become unable to absorb water, in which case you can break up the surface by loosening the soil then applying a layer of straw or other organic matter.

There is a positive effect of smoke, as it increases carbon dioxide which plants extract from the air to feed themselves using photosynthesis and releasing oxygen. Smoke can also diffuse the light and cool down temperatures, which we recently experienced with a cooling effect of the smoke from our 90 degree days.



COURTESY OF CHRIS BRANAN

Thoroughly rinsing your fruits and vegetables with clean water outside and then again in the kitchen sink should remove the ash.

But smoke and ash particles can also inhibit photosynthesis by clogging the stomatal pores in plant leaves, decreasing the amount of available food for the plant. Should your plants be covered with smoke and ash, you can simply wash them off using a water hose, being sure to spray both sides of their leaves.

To clean up the ash from your property, be sure and wear gloves and protective clothing as well as a N95 rated face mask or

a mask with a filter. Do not use leaf blowers or shop vacs which would stir up the ash into the air. Wash ash into landscaped areas wherever practical and water the ground regularly to ensure wind doesn’t continue to stir up the ash. Avoid washing ash into storm drains or where it would contaminate water sources.

Hopefully the autumn rains will begin soon to wash away the smoke and ash, and we can welcome clear, blue skies again. Stay safe.