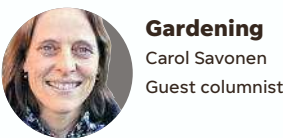


How you can use leftover hazelnut shells as mulch



Gardening
Carol Savonen
Guest columnist

Question: Can you tell me about hazelnut shells as a mulch? I've seen them, but know nothing about their effectiveness as a mulch or how fast they break down. Thanks.

Answer: Oregon grows almost all of the hazelnuts (AKA filberts) produced in North America, most of it here in the Willamette Valley. There are more than 600 growers and about 30,000 acres of hazelnut orchards in our region.

In the old days, most people ate hazelnuts by cracking each shell themselves. Time marched on and people have come to expect to buy their nuts with the shells removed. Hazelnut processing facilities have sprung up around the valley. A surplus of shells builds up. Now processors and other entrepreneurs are seeing the value in these shells and are marketing them as mulch or groundcover.

If you've ever cracked a hazelnut, you know how hard the shell is. Once cracked open the woody shells have sharp edges. The shells decompose slowly.

Hazelnut mulch is often sold in 1.5- to 2.5-cubic foot bags at garden centers. The price has come down over the years, as hazelnut acreage has increased, but they can be rather spendy bought a bag at a time. Some processing plants around the valley sell them in bulk as well. See <http://oregonhazelnuts.org/buy-hazelnuts/hazelnut-shells/> for a list.

The shells are extremely resistant to decay and can last many years. As they are lightweight, hazelnut shells are not suitable for slopes, heavily irrigated zones or windy areas. OSU Extension horticulturists say that the shells are low in nutrients; they supply almost no nutrients to the soil and have no effect on soil pH.

Sellers of hazelnut shells tout other benefits to the mulch. There are claims that hazelnut shell mulch reduces slug damage and provides a barrier to slugs and snails. I found no scientific research to back this up. The sharpness of the shells as mulch supposedly discourages cats from using the area as a bathroom.

Question: My neighbor and I are disagreeing on oak leaf removal in the fall. He vacuums/mows them up daily, sometimes twice a day. It drives me crazy. He says that oak leaves kill grass. Is this true?

Answer: Mostly not true, with cave-



Hazelnuts are an \$86 million industry in Oregon. ASSOCIATED PRESS

ats. If the leaves are left in a deep pile, then the grass beneath could die. There are mostly benefits from leaving some of your oak leaves on the ground, or as a mulch or in compost.

Leaves falling and lying on the ground in the fall is a natural phenomenon. There is a whole little ecosystem in this layer on the ground. Beneficial insects such as butterflies and moths use the leaves to overwinter in and under. The soil gets protected from pummeling rain. The leaves break down over time and provide natural fertilizer for the tree. Salamanders, turtles, toads,

shrews, earthworms and many other species benefit from a carpet of leaves left on the ground. Birds scratch through the leaf layer to find food.

If you do remove your leaves, don't throw them in the trash. Many areas have yard carts for curbside pick up of yard waste, which is then brought to a municipal composting facility.

Rake, don't blow leaves. The noise, the smell, the gas used are detrimental to peace of mind and planet both.

Use leaves as mulch to protect your flower and vegetable garden beds.

Fallen leaves make a wonderful com-

post ingredient, in addition with other organic material. Run over them with a lawnmower to hasten decomposition. Or do what I do—age them for a year, then use as mulch or compost. No mowing needed.

Carol Savonen is a naturalist and writer. She is an associate professor emeritus at OSU and tends a large garden in the Coast Range Hills west of Philomath with her husband and dogs. She can be reached at Carol.Savonen@oregonstate.edu or c/o: EESC, 422 Kerr Admin. Bldg., OSU, Corvallis, OR 97331.

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