



ask

Celebrating 20 Years! the landscape professional

Linda K. Lillie of Sprigs & Twigs

Welcome to my weekly series!

Email or mail your questions to: info@sprigsandtwigs.net or
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Thank you Readers for Voting Sprigs & Twigs
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Question this Week: *Our driveway is overshadowed by a lot of oak trees. This year there are an unusual amount of acorns falling. We have lived in Clinton for 10 years in the same house and we have observed great differences in the acorn crop. This year is about the largest we have ever seen. Is the size of the acorn crop an indication of the coming winter weather?...Richard*

Linda's Answer:

Hi Richard,

Thank you for a great question. I'm sure many people are wondering the same thing. The short answer to your question is that, in spite of the old-wives-tale, the size of the acorn crop doesn't forecast the future weather any better than we can! Actually, scientists are not absolutely certain what causes the acorn crop to vary greatly from year to year. There are, however, some pretty good hypotheses and they have to do with something called "masting" or "mast years". In botany the term "mast" refers to fruits of shrubs and trees, seeds and nuts that wildlife eat throughout the year. "Hard mast" are the hard nuts like acorns and "soft mast" are fruits like blueberries and winterberries. All trees that mast have "masting years" where extremely large numbers of fruits or nuts are produced. These masting years occur periodically and generally repeat themselves every 2-7 years. Amazingly, during "masting years" not just one tree or shrub, but all trees or shrubs of the same species in a geographic region synchronously produce an over-abundance of nuts or fruit. In the case of oak trees, forestry experts actually think they may be giving off a chemical that gets all trees producing great numbers of acorns at the same time. Think of a forest of oaks where just one large oak tree can produce over 10,000 acorns during a masting year! During off years, all trees or shrubs of a particular species produce a very small crop of fruits or nuts. While the cause of masting is a great mystery, many scientists believe that is a survival strategy of trees and shrubs that has adapted over the centuries and co-evolved with seed and fruit-eating predators. Simply put, trees and shrubs starve their predators during lean years (and the predator population diminishes), followed by the mast year when there is so much seed or fruit produced, it all can't be eaten by the predators and the trees and shrubs reproduce themselves more easily. Whatever the reason turns out to be, the fact that we are seeing large numbers of acorns this year serves as a future alert. Since mice and deer feed off the acorns, the deer tick population and Lyme disease will probably be on the rise next year.



Linda K. Lillie has been President of Sprigs & Twigs, Inc. for the last 20 years. She is a graduate of Connecticut College in Botany, an accredited NOFA Organic Land Care Professional, a Connecticut Master Gardener and a national award winning landscape designer for her design and installation projects..

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