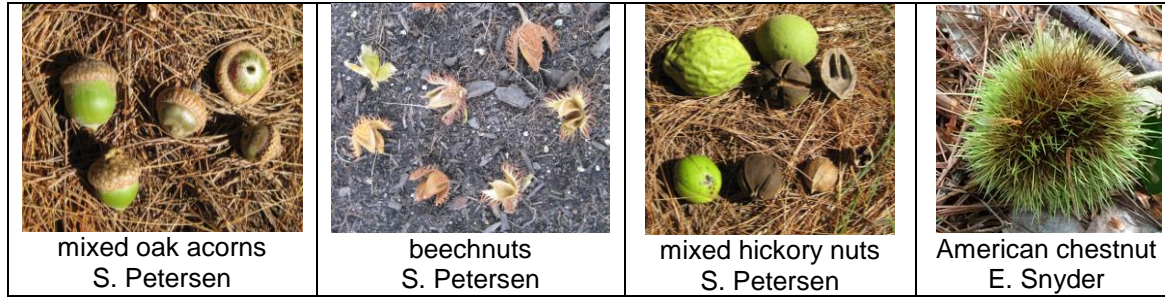


Nuts about Fall



Fall is always such a busy, beautiful time of year. Hints of crisp fall air coincide with the shorter days. People scramble to soak up the last days of summer's warmth and take care of all those fair-weather projects around the house. People aren't the only ones scrambling, however; squirrels, chipmunks, bears, and other critters are also busy preparing for winter.

Nuts are one of nature's fall treasures. By definition, nuts are fruits that have hard shells that surround a seed or kernel that is generally edible. (Horse chestnuts are NOT edible.) Nuts are plentiful, nutritious, and store well. The most abundant nuts are acorns, but other native nuts include beechnuts, hickory nuts, and American chestnuts.

Many critters make use of this bounty. Bears eat nuts as they find them, commonly packing on 20-30 pounds per week. Nuts, stored as fat, help the bears get through winter when they enter a state of partial hibernation. Squirrels and chipmunks, on the other hand, gather nuts and pack them away for a source of food throughout the winter. Squirrels, active year-round, tend to have small caches of nuts scattered throughout the landscape, whereas chipmunks are generally inactive in winter and usually store all their food in their dens. Some birds, such as blue jays, pack nuts into tree crevices or woodpecker holes for retrieval later.

Local nuts aren't just for squirrels; people can enjoy them, too. Native Americans and enthusiasts of local foods often use acorns as a food source. The bitter tannins can be removed and the remaining nut meat can be ground into a tasty, nutritious flour. Although not found in cold climates such as New England, pecans and walnuts have northern cousins, the hickories. Three species of hickories are common here: shagbark, bitternut, and pignut. (Be warned: bitternuts are bitter!) Beechnuts, too, can be eaten raw or cooked after removing the shiny skin between the prickly husk and the kernel. American chestnuts were once a defining tree in forests of the Northeast, but mature specimens are rare now due to an ongoing blight. American chestnuts are easily confused with more common horse chestnuts, which are toxic to humans. For the safety of people and American chestnut trees, please do not eat any local chestnuts you find.

Gathering and preparing the nuts takes some effort, but almost everything good takes work. Go nuts this fall!