Friday’s Feature  
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It’s a bumper year for acorns

Squirrels won't have to worry about finding enough nuts to store this winter. It’s a bumper year for acorns. To many, an abundant acorn crop means more debris to sweep off the sidewalk. To the state’s wildlife, however, lots of acorns on the ground spell good fortune.

Some years, only a handful of acorns appear on each tree but in other years, oaks produce an exceptional abundance of acorns. When a tree produces a ridiculously abundant crop of nuts, it is called a "mast" year. This usage of the word “mast” comes from a Middle English word for ”meat” and suggests that Native Americans were not the only humans for whom the acorn was a major dietary staple.

Mast years occur every four to seven years, but their timing is still a mystery. Numerous theories exist about factors influencing the variability in the mast ranging from weather to geography to the life cycles of predators.

It has even been postulated that the cycles developed as a survival technique. Low acorn production years lead to a decline in predator population. If a low production year is immediately followed by a year with a big acorn crop the chances for acorn and seedling survival are enhanced.

The most likely reason for high production seems to be weather-related. When spring weather at the time of oak flowering has been warm and dry, the mast seems to be increased.

Mast years are important to wildlife. Across the United States, almost 100 animal species rely on acorns as a major food source. Acorns, which are highly digestible and rich in carbohydrates, serve a wide range of animals in a variety of ways.

In low crop years, the birthrate for some species of wildlife, such as gray squirrels, will decline the following year. Because of the increased competition for food, some species have a tough time surviving.

This year's crop means that more young are likely to be produced by animals that forage for acorns.

Wildlife plays a big part in forest regeneration. Squirrels, blue jays and other wildlife are crucial to oak
regeneration. When acorns drop like marbles out of the trees, many animals help distribute these seeds in the forest. Squirrels can bury hundreds of acorns, at least some of which will take root.

For most gardeners however, abundant acorns mean having to deal with the oak seedlings in the spring. While not every acorn will sprout, many will.

Once the squirrels have had their fill, remove the acorns by raking or vacuum them up with a blower vac. While you will be able to remove some, invariably many acorns will remain.

In the spring, simply mow the oak seedlings as they sprout. Oak seedlings growing in the lawn will die after they have been mowed three or four times. They can only resprout so many times.

Oak seedlings in flower beds are a different story. Pulling them out is helpful but laborious. If you want to remove them by hand, you’ll need to make sure you remove most of the root system with a trowel or some other digging device. After a rain, when the ground is softened, is a perfect time to pull seedlings.

If you’re not opposed to the use of chemicals, wait until the plants have leafed out and wipe the leaves and stem with glyphosate (i.e., Roundup). Wearing a pair of rubber gloves, dampen a sponge in this herbicide solution and wipe the seedling leaves and stem until they’re wet.

Theresa Friday is the Residential Horticulture Extension Agent for Santa Rosa County. The use of trade names, if used in this article, is solely for the purpose of providing specific information. It is not a guarantee, warranty, or endorsement of the product name(s) and does not signify that they are approved to the exclusion of others.

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