

Greene County Parks
Autumn Harvest Time
by Naturalist Mel Grosvenor

Autumn is a time of harvest for humans and animals alike. For animals, this is a time to fatten up or prepare food caches that can be eaten throughout the winter. Nuts and seeds provide the bulk of this vital food source to many forest dwelling creatures. The collective term for nuts and seeds is mast, an old English term that literally means “forest food”. The term may also include seeds and fruits of grasses, herbs, pines and fungi. Mast is nutritious, containing more fat and protein than other plant foods.



Because of their hard shells, nuts are considered to be hard mast. They are very high in carbohydrates, making them an important energy source in colder months. Berries, maple seeds and other fleshy seeds are called soft mast. Not all mast is produced in the fall. Some plants produce mast during the other seasons and provide animals with what they need at that time. For example, berries of summer are high in sugar and carbohydrates, while the berries of fall and winter are higher in fats.

It is important for a forest to have many different tree species that produce mast, rather than just one. If something like a disease or an insect threatens that tree species, everything depending on it could be at risk. A forest with a mix of tree species will likely support more animal species as well.

Every four to seven years, there is what is known as a mast year, in which all the trees in a population synchronize their efforts and produce an unusual abundance of seeds and nuts. This doesn't happen every year because it takes a lot of energy. A mast year will supply animals with more than enough food and ensure that there will be a crop of seedlings to carry on. These generally seem to occur prior to a year with favorable growing conditions and when there is room for new growth. It is still a mystery what triggers a mast year, but many believe it is tied to weather patterns.



To learn more about nuts, seeds and berries and the animals that are stocking up on them, join us for Autumn Harvest: Nuts and Seeds, a free naturalist-led hike through Sara Lee Arnovitz Nature Preserve in Xenia on Sunday, November 9 at 2:00 p.m.