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## A tough nut to crack: Where are the acorns?

By Scott Kraus | Of The Morning Call  
December 3, 2008



**With acorns in short supply in Pennsylvania this year, squirrels are forced to find other food. (Douglas Kilpatrick, Allentown Morning Call / September 15, 2008)**

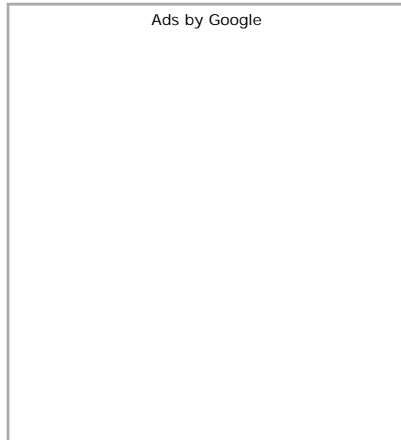
Forget the blind ones. Even squirrels with 20-20 vision will have trouble finding a nut in some parts of Pennsylvania this year.

White and red oaks -- two of the state's dominant forest species -- just aren't producing acorns the way they usually do.

It's a phenomenon that's been seen throughout the Mid-Atlantic, as naturalists in Virginia, Maryland and Delaware have also seen a decline in the number of acorns dropping from oak trees this fall.

There are plenty of theories but no consensus on the cause.

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But before you add "acorn disappearance" to bee colony collapse on your list of signs of the apocalypse, take some advice from Tina Alban, who runs the Department of Conservation and Natural Resources' state nursery in Spring Mills, Centre County.

"I don't worry about stuff like this," Alban said. "This happened to us five years ago, when there just weren't any acorns. We were a little worried about it, but next year, they were back."

Oak trees go through natural acorn fluctuations. Alban said that if she were forced to guess, she would say acorn production across Pennsylvania has dipped about 60 percent, based on the seeds the state collects each year to grow

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"South of Interstate 80, there was less collection than north of it," she said. "The northern end of the Peace Valley had a good acorn production."

And don't fret too much about the squirrels either, Alban said. They're pretty industrious. Just check your birdfeeder.

Black walnuts are one of the squirrels' favorite replacement foods, said Craig Olsen, director of Bucks County's Peace Valley Nature Center, and they are in abundance this fall.

**IN REALITY, THERE IS NO SUCH THING AS CLEAN COAL.**

Reality

There are, of course, side effects. "The squirrels mouths get all black, and they stay like that for a long time," he said.

more complaints from frustrated bird watchers as hungry birds search for food elsewhere, and from gardeners whose spring bulbs are added to the mix.

deer, bear and small forest rodents also dine on acorns, so some look elsewhere for food too. In its game reports, the Pennsylvania Game Commission cites abundant alternative food sources.

Acorn shortage hasn't been a major topic of discussion here, but in Virginia, it has been a hot topic. The Washington Post and plenty of speculation on the Internet.

"I don't see it as a cataclysmic type of thing," said Alfonso Abugattas, acting director of the Long Branch Nature Center in Arlington, Va., where acorns have nearly disappeared. "It would be if it were more widespread or it repeats year after year."

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**Still, he said, the decline in acorn production this year among red and white oaks has been perplexing. What's behind the dip? It's not the bees. Oak trees depend only on the wind to spread pollen.**

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**Some blame the weather. A heavy spring rain can wash away pollen and a late frost can kill the blossoms that later become acorns. Others attribute it to the trees' natural cycle.**

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**When under stress from drought, insects or disease, oaks often skip acorn production to devote more energy to survival, Alban said.**

**The Pennsylvania Game Commission blames gypsy moths.**

**Here's what Berks County forester Dave Henry put in his October forestry report: "So far, I have only found acorns from black oak and scarlet oak. Other oak species do not appear to have [acorns]. A forest pest has stressed my trees."**

**Squirrels quickly snap up what acorns do fall, Alban said.**

**"We have some large trees around here that we traditionally collected [acorns] from, there just wasn't anything to collect his year," she said. "The squirrels were sitting at the base of the tree waiting."**

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The problem seems to be regional and a bit spotty. Abugattas, who found himself researching major squirrel migrations Tuesday, said he has received e-mails from other parts of the country, such as Alabama, where the sender has claimed to be "awash in acorns."

Still, he said, the decline in acorn production this year among red and white oaks has been perplexing. What's behind the dip? It's not the bees. Oak trees depend only on the wind to spread pollen.

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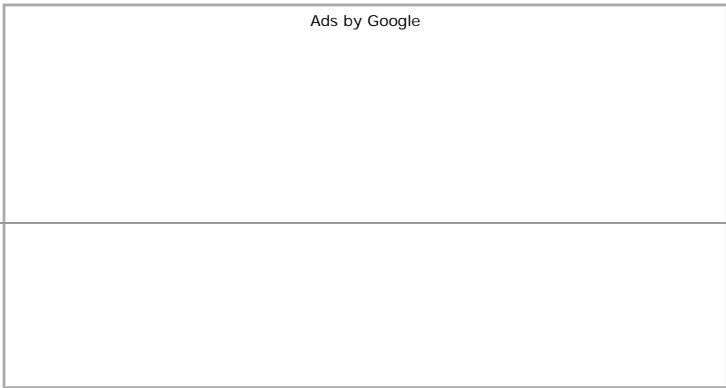
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