

Natural Resources

Dried cherry pits find fit as fuel

By JENNIFER VINCENT

CHERRIES, with their anti-inflammatory properties, have been referred to as a "superfood," but what's left after that goodness has been plucked from the tree and its flesh stripped might just very well be a "superfuel."

If you think paying for heat is the pits, Jeff Smith couldn't agree with you more.

Smith and wife Lisa, of St. Johns, have found value in what was formerly a waste product and have formed Michigan Cherry Pit Recyclers.

Up until recently, cherry pits were a by-product of production — a waste product that had to be hauled away.

"They mainly go to landfills or are land-applied" says Phil Korson, president of the Michigan Cherry Marketing Institute.

Smith has contracted with a northwest Michigan cherry processor for all its pits produced this year — upward of 40,000 bushels.

Using cherry pits as a biomass source of energy fits right in with the green movement by using what otherwise is a waste product, says Chris Schilling, professor of engineering at Saginaw Valley State University.

Key Points

- Cherry pits considered a waste byproduct and generally are hauled to landfills.
- Dried pits produce more Btu than corn, wood or wood pellets.
- Cherry pits are a renewable energy source.

"Many biomass materials behave the same way when burned, but what really creates a good, hot burning fuel source is low-moisture content," Schilling says.



JIM PLOWMAN

Last year Smith dried his first loads on tarps, but is using a grain dryer now to reduce moisture. "We don't have a moisture meter, but we dry them until the steam is gone and it gets real dusty," he says.

Because Smith can buy the pits quite cheaply, the added expense of drying them still pencils out and creates a product people want. He says people come from as far away as Detroit, Grand Rapids and even Indiana to buy cherry pits because they

burn hotter than other biofuels or pellets with very little ash.

According to Thomas B. Reed of the Biomass Energy Foundation and the Northwest Michigan Horticulture

Research Station, cherry pits produce about 9,523 Btu per pound, while dried, shelled corn produces 8,500 Btu, and wood pellets produce 8,000."

Because the pits burn so hot, Korson says you have to be mindful of how the cherry pits are being burned. While they can be used in wood-burning stoves, Korson says they are best used through an auger system. "You need a stove that can handle the heat."

Good mix

Mark Seamon, a Michigan State University Extension bioeconomy innovation counselor, says cherry pits are a good fuel, and they "fit well with other types of pelleted fuels or corn grain. They can be mixed with other fuel sources."

Jim Plowman, who uses the pits to heat his 1,500-square-foot home, says he's glad to find a consistent supply of cherry pits in the central Michigan area.

"I've been using them on and off for 20 years when I could get them," he says.

"Tractor Supply has carried them before, but they don't carry a lot, and its availability is sporadic," he adds.

Plowman says cherry pits "burn very clean with little ash; it's finer so it doesn't plug up the air vents. I can burn a month without cleaning."

On average, Plowman says he burns about 6 tons of cherry pits a year.

Smith buys the pits and trucks down



WASTE NOT: What once was a byproduct and a waste material from cherry processing is being turned into a fuel source for wood or pellet stoves. Jeff and Lisa Smith of St. Johns are drying and selling the pits in a 33-pound bag for \$4 or by the ton for \$210.

about 1,800 bushels at a time. "I've looked into rail, but it wasn't a savings."

Dryer uses propane

The grain dryer is fueled by propane. Smith says he'd like to take the concept of green energy full circle. "Eventually, I'd like to use dried cherry pits to fuel the dryer to dry more pits," he says.

While Gov. Jennifer Granholm has touted the need for green energy, Smith says he hasn't gotten much support. "I've ran into a lot of bureaucracy and red tape in trying to find help," he says. "I'm not looking for a handout, but it would be nice to get some help in getting financed. It's been very frustrating, but I haven't given up. We haven't abandoned this concept."

For more information about cherry pits as fuel or to order cherry pits from Jeff Smith, call 989-224-2883 or 989-640-4628.



BY THE TON: All the cherry pits produced by Michigan Cherry Pit Recyclers is bagged, but can be bought by the ton, which is two pallets.



BUY IN BAGS: To make cherry pits easier to handle, Jeff Smith augers the cherry pits in from a grain dryer to be bagged.