



Disposal of Leftover Paint*

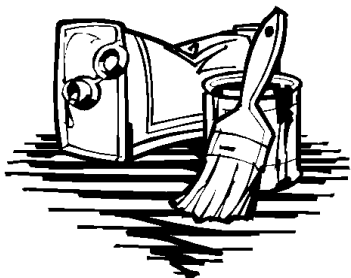
Americans use three-million gallons of paint every day - more than a billion gallons every year. This amount of paint could fill a lake 20-feet deep, four-miles long and one-mile wide.

Everyone faces painting decisions sometime in their lives, and there's more to it than choosing a color. What kind of paint you use and what you do with it when you're done has a direct impact on the environment. Even how you clean the brushes matters.

'Paint' refers to a range of coating materials separated into two categories. If paint thinner or mineral spirits needs to be used to clean up brushes and hands, the paint is oil-based. If water is used for clean up, the paint is latex or water-based.

Oil-based paint and paint products - thinners, solvents, stains and finishes - are classified as hazardous by the Environmental Protection Agency. Oil-based paint can damage the environment and human and animal health. If the paint is thrown in the trash in liquid form, it could eventually get into the groundwater.

Lead was banned from paint in 1973, and mercury was banned in 1990. Given that the average American has about four gallons of old paint sitting around in basements and garages, it's not surprising that collection programs still turn up lead paint. Mercury will be common for some time to come. The long-term solutions for eliminating lead-based paint are to remove it and replace it



with latex or water-based paint.

Using it up

Check out any paint you may have stored away. If the paint is latex and still looks fresh, try mixing it with other odds and ends of latex paint. The color will turn out beige, gray or muddy. If you like the resulting color, use it in your house. Otherwise, it's fine for a garage, basement or as a primer. Only use the mixture outside if the ingredients were all exterior paints.

Some areas have come up with creative ways to "share the wealth" of unused paint. For example, some counties in Indiana have a "paint bulking" program that collects and mixes together large amounts of latex paint.

About 45 percent of what's collected can be used. Dirty and moldy paint is properly disposed. The remainder is strained and blended. No matter what shades get mixed in, the results come out about the same shade of beige. It has about a one-year shelf life and is distributed to community groups and the general public.

Some communities also have paint-exchange programs where people bring reusable paint to trade or give away. Santa Monica, Calif., alone has recirculated more than 600 gallons of paint this way. You could also donate your unused paint to a church, school or community group.

Disposing of what's left

If your leftover paint is latex-based and dries out before you can use it, it's all right to dispose of it with your other trash.

If the latex paint isn't entirely dry or it gets moldy, it can be left open outside to evaporate. Stirring periodically speeds up drying, but don't be in a hurry. Depending on the amount of paint, the evaporation process could take up to a year.



If the paint is oil-based, it's a bigger disposal problem because the volatile hydrocarbons it contains could ignite. Never let it sit open to evaporate - the fumes are toxic and pollute the environment.

Many oil-based paints are also pigmented with heavy metals like cadmium. So use up the oil-based paint you have. If you can't, your next best choice is to take it to a hazardous-waste facility for disposal.

Never dispose of any kind of paint or paint product by pouring it on the ground or into a sewer. Do that, and the hazardous materials in the paint could make their way into our water supply. You should wash brushes in a sink so the paint will make its way to a waste-water treatment facility.

What about other paint products?

Paint strippers, thinners, varnishes, stains, turpentine and glues contain toxic chemicals that can cause air and water pollution and may present health risks.

Safe alternatives to strippers include water, baby oil, butter or margarine to remove paint from hands, and sandpaper, scrapers, heat guns and water-based strippers to remove paint from surfaces.

If you must use one of these products, buy only what you need. If you have some left over, share it with a friend. Landscapers, railroads, nurseries, wood-treating companies, graphic artists, furniture refinishers, small autobody or auto-repair shops, paint contractors or dry cleaners may be able to use these leftover products.

If you must dispose of them, do it at a household hazardous waste collection center. If a collection program isn't available, label the product clearly, seal tightly and keep away from children and pets until used up.

* Adapted from: *Facts About Paint*, by the Indiana Department of Environmental Management, Indiana Recycling Coalition. Adapted for use in Kentucky by Mike Klahr, Boone County Extension Agent for Horticulture.

Next time around

- Choose water-based paints instead of oil-based.
- Avoid spray paints.
- Avoid exotic colors you aren't likely to reuse.
- Estimate the proper amount needed for the job and buy only what you need.
- Use it up by applying a second coat or touch up.
- Use leftovers on other projects. Properly stored paint will stay in good condition for up to 10 years.



Free paint disposal guide:

Paint Disposal...the Right Way is available from the National Paint and Coating Association, 1500 Rhode Island Ave., NW, Washington, D.C. 20005.