

# FACT SHEET: Burn Barrel Information

## We've burned our garbage for years – what's the big deal?

The practice of putting a match to your family's garbage has been a tradition for generations. Until a few decades ago, the practice was much less dangerous to your health, since most household garbage contained only paper, wood and glass – materials that, when burned, give off smoke and ash. However, modern garbage is now a mix of plastics and other synthetics that release a hazardous mixture of carcinogens (cancer-causing chemicals) and other toxins when burned. Even seeming harmless items, like white office paper and the lightweight cardboard boxes used for items you buy at the grocery store can give off toxic emissions that cause serious environmental and health problems.

## Incinerators burn garbage – why can't I?

Burn barrel fire temperatures rarely exceed 500 degrees F, whereas municipal garbage incinerators operate at temperatures near 2200 degrees F, to insure complete combustion of the refuse and some pollutants inside. Incinerators also employ a series of sophisticated filters to reduce the amount of harmful emissions of chemicals and ash from the chimney. Because burn barrel operate at temperatures far below the level for complete combustion and lack filtration entirely, they emit a much larger quantity of toxins and ash. For each pound of garbage burned in a burn barrel, with as many furans, seventeen times as much dioxin and forty times as much ash is given off compared to the emissions from the same pound of garbage burned in an incinerator.



## What is given off when garbage burns?

Besides ash (particulates) furans, dioxins, and other halogenated hydrocarbons, burn barrels give off high level carbon monoxide, carbon dioxide, sulfur dioxide, and heavy metals such as lead, arsenic, mercury, barium, chromium, and cadmium. Together, these chemicals cause a wide variety of health problems, from mild irritations to chronic and deadly diseases. Any they need not be directly inhaled from the smoke of burning garbage to be harmful; some of these toxins remain the immediate vicinity and the area downwind of the burn barrel for decades. Other toxins in the ash and emissions gradually work their way into groundwater. This accumulation exposes you and your community living on the same land to ever-increasing levels of hazardous substances.

## Not as safe as you thought? Here's what to do.

With all of the information suggesting that burning your own garbage can damage your health and the health of people for decades to come, why take a chance? Safe and sanitary garbage collection is available throughout your community. Or better yet – also reduce the amount of items going into the landfill by recycling through several free locations or subscribe to curbside pick up.

## **What individuals can do**

- **Reduce** usage--buy in bulk or larger quantities and select less packaging on the products you buy.
- **Reuse** items--find someone else who can use it, have a yard sale, or donate it to a resale organization.
- **Recycle** newspaper, office paper, cardboard, corrugated cardboard, magazines, aluminum, metal and acceptable plastics.
- **Compost** leaves and plant clippings. .
- **Chip** brush and clean wood to make mulch or decorative chips, or use it as heating fuel in wood stoves or boilers.
- **Dispose** of allowable waste materials at a licensed landfill.

Additional information at:  
[www.stopburningtrash.org](http://www.stopburningtrash.org)

*Information brought to you by:*  
**Shelby County Solid Waste Management District**  
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*Information source:*  
Environmental Services, Carver County MN  
WI—DNR

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