



## Lead in Garden Soils

We don't usually think of our gardens as dangerous or toxic, but unfortunately, some garden soils do contain moderate to very high levels of lead. Garden soils contaminated with lead pose a serious health risk. The risk is primarily from contaminated soil brought into the home on clothing, shoes and tools. The soil becomes mixed with house dust that is inhaled or ingested. This can result in dangerous increases in blood lead levels, particularly in infants and toddlers. Lead may also be ingested from contaminated soil clinging to vegetable crops. However, lead uptake by plant roots and deposition inside edible plant parts is relatively low, even when soils have a high lead content.

### For more information on gardening and lead in soils see the following websites:

- University of Illinois Extension horticulture websites provide general gardening information at <http://web.extension.illinois.edu/state/horticulture>.
- ILRiverHort Blog includes a category dedicated to community and other food gardens at <http://web.extension.illinois.edu/fmpt/eb253>.
- Growing Gardens in Urban Soils factsheet from EPA at [https://www.epa.gov/sites/production/files/2014-03/documents/urban\\_gardening\\_fina\\_fact\\_sheet.pdf](https://www.epa.gov/sites/production/files/2014-03/documents/urban_gardening_fina_fact_sheet.pdf).
- Sources and Impacts of Contaminants in Soils by Cornell Waste Management Institute at <http://cwmi.css.cornell.edu/sourcesandimpacts.pdf>.
- Lead Poisoning Prevention from Illinois Department of Public Health at <http://www.dph.illinois.gov/topics-services/environmental-health-protection/lead-poisoning-prevention>.
- Food Safety in Your Home Vegetable Garden at <http://anrcatalog.ucanr.edu/pdf/8366.pdf>.

## Sources of Lead

Chipping or peeling paint around older structures will raise the lead level in the soils directly adjacent to the building. Even today, when an old building is demolished, the soil can become contaminated with lead from old lead paint. In the 1950's, cheaper titanium pigments largely replaced lead pigments. Federal restrictions were not imposed until the late 1970's.

Soil can be contaminated with lead from several other sources – industrial sites, leaded fuels, old lead plumbing pipes, or even old orchard sites in production when lead arsenate was used as a pesticide. Lead accumulates in the upper 8 inches of the soil and is highly immobile. Contamination is long-term. Without remedial action, high soil lead levels will never return to normal.

## Health Risks

We do not require lead in our diet or environment. At very low levels that naturally occur in soils (10–50 ppm), no detrimental health effects have been noted. But higher soil lead levels can raise the body's lead level without producing any obvious physical symptoms. Young children under the age of 6 and pregnant women are at the greatest risk. As a group, children exposed to lead have lower IQs and may experience permanent learning disabilities and behavioral disorders when compared to children not exposed to lead.

## Reducing Health Risks

Gardeners can reduce the risk of lead poisoning from lead contaminated soils by following these recommendations:

- Don't locate food gardens next to a busy road or a home built prior to 1940 with a painted wooden exterior.
- Contaminated soil particles are more likely to cling to or become embedded in leafy greens and root crops than on fruiting vegetables like tomatoes and cucumbers.
- Always wash all vegetables and peel all root crops before they are cooked and eaten. Remove the outer wrapper leaves of cabbage.
- Wash off excess soil from root and leaf crops outside the house, preferably at an outside hose bib, to prevent bringing contaminated soil into the home.
- Fruiting vegetables (tomato, pepper, cucumber) are less likely to contain high lead levels compared to leafy vegetables (lettuce, spinach) and root vegetables (carrot, turnip).
- The amount of lead absorbed by plants is affected by the soil ph, organic matter and phosphorus content of the soil, and total soil lead level. To reduce lead uptake by plants, adjust the ph of the soil to a level of 6.5 to 7.0. Add organic matter such as compost, manure, leaf mold, or grass clippings to the gardening site. Add phosphorus to the soil as recommended by a soil test.
- In heavily contaminated soils adjacent to a residence, plant trees, shrubs or perennials and mulch the area to keep the soil covered. Soil removal and replacement should be considered if the soil lead level is over 5000 ppm total lead.
- Use raised beds or containers when growing food crops where the soil tests over 400 ppm total lead. Cover the soil below raised beds with landscape fabric and fill with a mixture of clean topsoil (low in lead) and compost.
- Don't allow young children to play in contaminated soils. Frequent hand washing and rinsing outside toys will reduce the amount of soil ingested. Always wash hands before eating meals or snacks. Have family members leave outdoor shoes in a cardboard box at the door, to avoid spreading lead contaminated dust through the home. Rinse and launder gardening clothing promptly. Mulch play areas with wood chips or other soft materials to reduce soil dust.
- Parents of children under age 6 living in areas with contaminated soils should consult their physician. A blood test to monitor lead levels may be recommended.

## Soil Testing

Elevated lead levels are more common in urban neighborhoods, but suburban and rural soils may also be contaminated. Testing for lead will help to evaluate the potential risk to health. The risk is based on exposure. Both private and university soil test labs can determine lead levels in soils. No legal regulations for soil lead levels are in effect. However, the most current U.S. Environmental Protection Agency recommendation is to avoid growing vegetables in soil with a total level above 400 ppm (<http://www2.epa.gov/lead/protect-your-family#soil>). And some university researchers recommend that gardeners avoid sites with a total soil lead level above 100 ppm, especially if children will be playing or gardening (<http://www.extension.umn.edu/garden/yard-garden/soils/lead-in-home-garden/>).

Soil samples should be taken from several areas to determine the location of the contamination. The greatest lead concentration is in the top 1 to 2 inches of soil. Children's play areas or vegetable gardens should be sampled separately. Avoid mixing several sites into one sample. All vegetable garden soils should be tested for lead. Soil laboratory results will be returned listing the parts per million (ppm) of lead from either an extracted or total lead test, or both. Pay careful attention to the total lead values.

Before growing any food crops, it is always a good idea to have a soil test. A general soil fertility test evaluates essential nutrients for plants, ph, as well as suggestions for fertilization applications. Some soil testing labs will also test for the presence of heavy metals such as lead. The following laboratories in Central Illinois will test soil for lead. For a complete list of soil labs in Illinois, go to [extension.illinois.edu/soiltest](http://extension.illinois.edu/soiltest).

SGS Toulon  
117 E. Main Street  
PO Box 540  
Toulon, IL 61483  
[www.sgsgroup.us.com](http://www.sgsgroup.us.com)  
309-286-2761  
[soilservices@sgs.com](mailto:soilservices@sgs.com)

GMS Laboratories  
23877 E. 00 North Road  
Cropsey, IL 61731  
[www.gmslab.com](http://www.gmslab.com)  
309-377-2851  
[office@gmslab.com](mailto:office@gmslab.com)

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Nicole Flowers  
Horticulture Educator  
[nflower2@illinois.edu](mailto:nflower2@illinois.edu)  
309-547-3711  
ILRiverHort  
[web.extension.illinois.edu/fmpt](http://web.extension.illinois.edu/fmpt)

Information originally compiled by Rhonda Ferree, Extension Horticulture Educator, retired 2018

Adapted with permission from Jon H. Traunfeld, University of Maryland Extension Specialist. Home and Garden Information Center Factsheet, Lead in Garden Soils, found at [https://extension.umd.edu/sites/extension.umd.edu/files/images/programs/hgic/Publications/HG18\\_Lead\\_in\\_Garden\\_Soils.pdf](https://extension.umd.edu/sites/extension.umd.edu/files/images/programs/hgic/Publications/HG18_Lead_in_Garden_Soils.pdf)