Burn Barrels Encyclopedia Article

Burn Barrels

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Contents

Burn Barrels Encyclopedia Article.....1

Contents.....2

Burn Barrels.....3

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People used to think that burning household trash and yard waste in an open barrel was an inexpensive, good way to get rid of it. However, today's packaging and products are often made from plastics, dyes, and other synthetics. When burned, these cause air pollution and, in a number of U.S. states and municipalities, it is illegal. Burn barrels operate at relatively low temperatures, typically at 400 to 500° Fahrenheit (F) and have poor combustion efficiency (municipal incinerators run in the 1200 to 2000° F range).

As a result, many pollutants are generated and emitted directly into the air. Backyard trash and leaf burning often release high levels of toxic compounds, some of which are **carcinogenic**. Smoke from burning garbage often contains acid gases, heavy metal vapors, carbon monoxide and other sorts of dangerous toxins. One of the most harmful pollutants released during open trash burning is dioxin, a known carcinogen associated with birth defects. Dioxin can be inhaled directly or deposited on soil, water, and crops, where it becomes part of the food chain. Research has demonstrated that a single burn barrel can generate as much dioxin as a municipal incinerator serving thousands of households.

Internet Resource

U.S. Environmental Protection Agency Web site. Available from http://www.epa.gov/ttn.