

Tips for Gardening Safely in Urban Soils

As we look toward spring gardening and landscaping, here are some quick tips for keeping you and your family safe from any lead that may be left in your soil from the days of leaded gasoline or lead in paint.

Lead Levels

The US EPA has established a standard of 400 ppm of lead in soil for residential properties. If your soil has a lead level above 400 ppm, we do not recommend using this part of your yard for gardening, farming, or children's play areas.

While there is no safe amount of lead for humans to consume, it's pretty difficult in this day and age to avoid all exposure to lead. We don't want you to stop gardening or playing in your yard, but we do want you to be smart about it. So here are some recommendations for protecting you and your family from lead exposure.

The most important thing in protecting yourself from lead is to know how it gets into your body. In the case of gardens, it's through the ingestion of garden soil. Most of us don't commonly eat garden soil – so it's usually inadvertently through soil on our hands or on the vegetables we eat. Unfortunately, those that are the most likely to be impacted by soil lead are also the ones that are most likely to eat soil: young children.

Raised Beds: If you are concerned about lead exposure one of the most common tactics is growing in raised beds. Raised beds can be constructed from a variety of materials but the most common is wood. These are then filled with new soil which is hopefully free of lead.

Crop Selection: While many people assume that the exposure to lead in garden soils is from uptake of lead into vegetables and fruits, this isn't usually the case. Most lead is found clinging to the surface of vegetables. Because of this, root crops tend to have the highest levels of lead, then leaf crops and finally fruit crops. If you are concerned about lead levels then focusing on fruiting crops is recommended.

Peel and Clean 'em: Since lead is on the surface it is recommended that you peel root crops and wash all other crops. We recommend putting a splash of vinegar in the water or using dish soap and washing crops as you would a cup or plate.

Cover it: Since soil ingestion is the most likely source for lead – keeping your soil covered can greatly reduce exposure. You can use wood chips around perennials, sod or wood chips in raised beds, straw mulch or shredded leaves around vegetable crops.

Consider Perennials: Perennial fruits are usually perched high in the air away from the ground increasing their safety. Also perennials don't need soils to be tilled or turned each year keeping soils safely underground.

Keep it Clean: Consider making your house a shoe free zone, wearing gardening gloves, and washing your gardening clothes separate from children's clothes.

Happy planting!

For more tips, visit:
www.ecoworksdetroit.org/soilleadproject

