

MountainKeeping Column July 19, 2007

Recognizing and Disposing of Toxic Household Items

By Wendy Patoprsty

If yours is like most American homes, you have at least a few potentially dangerous items that you just don't know how to get rid of. And you also have items that you may not even realize contain toxic materials.

Take compact fluorescent light bulbs (CFLs) for example. You may have purchased CFL bulbs to be more energy efficient. Unlike regular bulbs, CFLs contain a very small amount of mercury sealed within the glass tubing -- an average of 5 milligrams per bulb (roughly equivalent to the tip of a ball-point pen). Unfortunately, there is currently no substitute for mercury in CFLs. Throwing CFLs into any landfill is not a recommended or safe practice. Watauga County Sanitation does not have permits to store CFLs, so they only accept them on the two Hazardous Household Waste Days each year in the spring and fall.

How about those old bottles of prescription medicines or over-the-counter drugs? Don't flush them down the toilet. According to Dr. Shea Tuberty, professor of biology at Appalachian State University, common household pharmaceuticals reach the environment through human excretion or by the flushing of old medicines that collect at municipal wastewater treatment plants. Despite the common perception that everything harmful is removed from the sewage before waste water is released back into our rivers and streams, many chemical compounds in medicines enter the streams in their active forms and can have adverse effects on the physiology of native fish, amphibians, and invertebrates.

For example, birth control estrogens can feminize male fish by inducing them to make eggs, and antidepressants can inhibit fish from mating or from defending their nesting territories, leading to reductions in reproductive rates.

Trace amounts of all kinds of drugs have also been found in some drinking water supplies because they pass through septic systems and sewage plants untreated. The best way to dispose of prescription medicines and over-the-counter products is to take them out of their original containers and put them in the trash.

It's warm out, and that often means house beautification projects. If you should decide to paint interior or exterior walls, it's important to know about volatile organic compounds (VOCs) off-gassing indoors from the paint. Indoor air is three times more polluted than outdoor air. Paints and finishes are among the leading causes of in-home air pollution, which, according to the Environmental Protection Agency, is one of the top five hazards to human health. An extensive list of companies that provide low and zero VOC paints, finishes, and stains can be found at www.eartheasy.com. More than 300 million used

paint brushes are discarded uncleaned into landfills every year in Canada and the U.S.A. alone.

It's best to clean and reuse paint brushes. The most effective way to clean paint brushes without polluting the environment is to wipe all excess paint from the brush with a rag or paper. Plunge the brush in a container of water and then into a second container for a final rinse. Let paint solids settle in the two containers overnight. The clear water can be drained into the yard and the solids can be left to dry and placed in the trash.