

# Ironite Fertilizer: Arsenic and Old Waste

It may be hard to believe, but many fertilizers sold in stores like Lowe's and Home Depot contain toxic waste from industries. Although these toxic-waste fertilizers often contain heavy metals and other poisons, there are very few regulations to protect us or the food supply from the hidden ingredients in these products.

## What is Ironite?

Ironite—a popular fertilizer used by consumers, and on golf courses and athletic fields—is made from mining waste generated by the Iron King Mine in Arizona. Ironite can be purchased at Home Depot, Lowe's, Target, and other major retail outlets.

## What does Ironite contain?

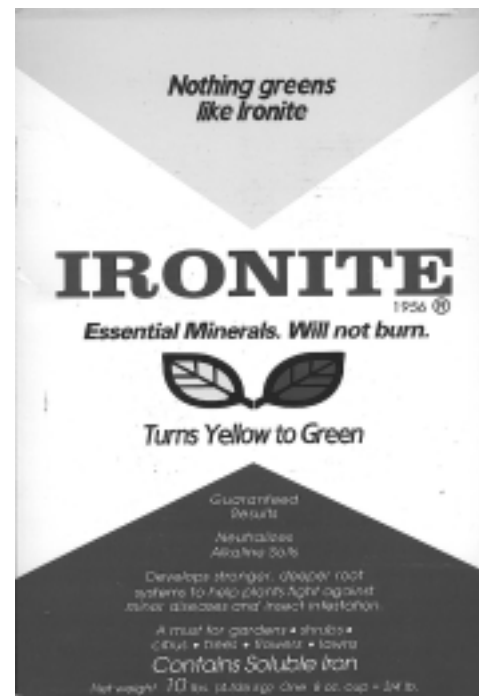
Ironite contains arsenic and lead.

- Data compiled by EPA on fertilizer contaminants shows that Ironite contains—by a wide margin—the highest levels of arsenic of all fertilizer products surveyed.

- Testing of Ironite by the state of Minnesota shows that the product contains up to 6020 parts per million arsenic and 3400 parts per million lead. According to information provided by the Ironite Products Company and published by the Washington State Department of Agriculture, it contains 4380 parts per million arsenic and 2940 parts per million lead. These ingredients are not listed on the label.

- In 1998, the state of Oregon performed a hazardous-waste test on Ironite. Oregon found that Ironite classifies as a hazardous waste due to the levels of arsenic in the product.

The company claims the product is safe because the toxic chemicals are bound tightly and are not absorbed by the body. However, the state of Washington conducted tests to determine whether the arsenic and lead in Ironite are bioavailable and the tests indicated that up to 36% of the arsenic and up to 81% of the lead is bioavailable.



## **What are the potential problems with lead and arsenic in fertilizer?**

Arsenic is a known carcinogen, and even small amounts of lead can harm a child's ability to learn. Children can be exposed to lead and arsenic through skin contact with the soil after lawns and gardens are fertilized or by ingesting fertilizer on fertilized soil. According to a Washington State Department of Health news release on Ironite's potential health hazards issued in May 1998, "Depending on how much arsenic is actually absorbed into the body after ingestion, accidental ingestion of less than 1/2 teaspoon of this fertilizer may be toxic to small children."

Lead and arsenic can build up in soil. University of Minnesota soil scientist Carl Rosen had applied Ironite to his own garden. While the background level of arsenic is about one part per million in Minnesota soils, the soil in Dr. Rosen's garden after he used Ironite was 100 parts per million.

## **How do mine tailings wind up in fertilizer?**

Since 1986, federal rules have exempted mining wastes from hazardous-waste disposal requirements. This makes mining wastes easier to "recycle" and wind up in the channels of commerce as fertilizer products.

## **Have there been any legal actions by state agencies on Ironite?**

Yes. In April 2002, the state of Maine went to court seeking penalties and an injunction against Ironite, alleging the company failed to obtain state permits necessary to distribute a fertilizer made from solid waste. In May 2002, the makers of the fertilizer Ironite decided to remove the product from Maine store shelves until a court decides whether it is legal to sell it.

## **What should you consider when choosing a fertilizer?**

Testing your soil is the first step to determining whether you need fertilizer and if so which nutrients your soil might need. For lawns, natural lawn-care methods and slow-release fertilizers appropriate for local soil conditions should be used.

## **What can you do to stop mining waste from being recycled into fertilizer?**

- Contact your local Home Depot, Lowe's, and Target and tell them you are concerned about the arsenic and lead in Ironite.
- Write a letter to the CEOs of Home Depot, Lowe's, and Target about Ironite. The addresses are as follows:

Bob Nardelli  
Chief Executive Officer  
Home Depot  
2455 Paces Ferry Road NW  
Atlanta, GA 30339-4024  
770-433-8211

Robert L. Tillman  
Chief Executive Officer  
Lowe's Companies, Inc.  
P.O. Box 1111  
North Wilkesboro, NC 28656  
1-800-44LOWES

Bob Ulrich  
Chief Executive Officer  
Target Corporation  
1000 Nicollet Mall  
Minneapolis, MN 55403  
612-304-6073