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# Toxic mulch means White House play area not fun and games

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By Nancy Alderman

THE Obamas recently installed a playscape for their children in the White House backyard. Whoever installed the playground covered the earth under the play equipment with used ground-up rubber tire mulch.

A spokesperson for the White House, Camille Johnston, said they followed the recommendations of the National Recreation and Park Association when they chose and installed the rubber mulch. Johnston continued by saying, "the mulch is going to stay."

Why is this a problem? In some states, rubber tires are a "hazardous waste" and in other states they are considered a "special waste." Whichever the case, used rubber tires are not a material that children should play on.

My organization, Environment and Human Health, Inc., remains concerned about the health implications of children playing on ground-up rubber tires, whether they are the small children who experience them under their playscapes or older children who experience them as the loose infill in synthetic turf fields.

This same material is also being sold as garden mulch, and has the potential to contaminate soil and water as well as stunt plant growth. If ground-up rubber tire mulch is put on vegetable gardens it would be possible for the vegetables to absorb some of the chemicals found in the rubber tires.

The manufacturers of the rubber mulch for gardens present it as one of convenience because it won't break down and people won't have to mulch again for many years. However, real garden mulch is meant to break down and become part of the soil.

Why is this material a problem for children and gardens?

First of all, ground up rubber tires are filled with a number of toxic chemicals and these chemicals are capable of leaching out of the tires. Secondly, the rubber absorbs heat and gets very hot in the warmer months. Temperatures have been measured at many times hotter than the grass around the rubber tire material. Some people have measured synthetic turf fields with ground-up rubber tires at 161 degrees when the outdoor temperature was 91 degrees. At the same time, a parking lot was measured at 111 degrees.

The Connecticut Agricultural Experiment Station in New Haven has analyzed a sample of ground-up rubber tires

and found major toxic compounds. One is a skin and eye irritant, one is a recognized carcinogen and another is harmful to mucous membranes.

Other well-known chemicals that are often found in rubber tires include benzene, which is a carcinogen; phthalates, which are suspected to cause harm to reproductive systems; and latex, which can cause allergic reactions in some people.

Rubber tires have always been very hard to dispose of. They cost a lot of money to get rid of, so one can only imagine how happy some industries are to grind them up and sell them to unsuspecting people as a recycled product.

The used rubber tires are shredded and cut in differing sizes depending on what they are being sold as: the smallest size for infill on synthetic turf fields, the larger size for garden and playground mulch. However, whatever the size and whatever the end product is being sold as, it is all simply used rubber tires. The garden and playground rubber mulch are often dyed different colors to make the product look more appealing. For instance, the Obama's playground mulch was dyed green.

What had been a hazardous waste is being turned into a profitable industry — but at whose expense?

Recycling is good — but there are certain things that should not be recycled. We should not recycle asbestos, we should not recycle lead and we should not recycle rubber tires, certainly not where children play.

*Nancy Alderman is president of Environment and Human Health, Inc, 1191 Ridge Road, North Haven 06473. E-mail her at [info@ehhi.org](mailto:info@ehhi.org).*

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