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## Don't let leftover paint leave you blue

By Tom Watson

Special to The Seattle Times

A fresh coat of paint does wonders to spiff up our homes. Paint shows its true colors on the wall, but paint that doesn't get used can reveal a darker side, when it becomes a disposal challenge.

Ten percent of the paint sold annually in the U.S. is never used, according to the paint industry. Minimizing the amount of leftover paint saves money and reduces waste. Yet despite our best intentions, we often end up with cans of old paint in the basement or garage.

**Q:** Much of my leftover paint is latex. How do I get rid of that these days?

**A:** If you can't use it up or give it away, the best way to dispose of unwanted latex paint is to solidify it and put it in the garbage. Kitty litter works well for this, or look for a product called "paint hardener" at hardware stores.

Mix roughly equal amounts of latex paint and clay-based kitty litter. You can do this in an old plastic bag propped inside a low-sided box, and then once the paint is hardened, toss the bag in the trash. Hardening should only take a few hours. Put dry, empty paint cans in the garbage.

**Q:** Many government hazardous-waste programs used to accept latex paint. Why did they stop?

**A:** Latex paint is water-based and is not considered a hazardous substance. As a cost-saving measure, government-run household hazardous-waste collection facilities in King, Pierce and Snohomish counties all have stopped collecting latex paint in the past few years.

**Q:** What about other types of paint?

**A:** Government-operated hazardous-waste facilities in most counties accept oil-based paints and stains. For sites in Seattle and King County, see [www.lhwmp.org/home/HHW/hhw.aspx](http://www.lhwmp.org/home/HHW/hhw.aspx). There is no fee for drop-off.

**Q:** What happens to all that collected non-latex paint?

**A:** Oil-based paints, along with thinners and solvents, get blended into alternative-fuel mixtures. These replace fossil fuels in industrial operations such as cement kilns.

**Q:** Are there other approaches to dealing with unwanted paint?

**A:** One of the most innovative systems is in Oregon, which has the first "product stewardship" law in the nation for paint recycling and proper disposal. Under this program, which began July 1, the paint industry has established convenient take-back locations for paint, including latex, at retailers and government hazardous-waste facilities across the state.

Costs of the Oregon program are covered by paint manufacturers and by a fee paid by paint buyers at the time of purchase, ranging from 35 cents on a half-pint of paint to \$1.60 on a 5-gallon pail. Support exists within the paint industry for expanding this concept to other states or nationwide. Find more information at the industry website [www.PaintCare.org](http://www.PaintCare.org).

Unwanted latex paint also can be blended and resold at a low price, which has been done by the Metro regional government in the Portland area for years.

**Q:** What are the best ways to reduce leftover paint?

**A:** Carefully estimate the size of your job to avoid buying more paint than you need. Find an online tool for this with an Internet search for "King County paint calculator." As a general rule, one gallon covers about 400 square feet.

Since you may want to keep a little paint for future touch-ups, proper storage will make sure paint doesn't go bad. Keep paint in a cool, dry place. Many experts recommend sealing the can tightly and then turning it upside down for storage. The websites listed above offer additional tips for reducing unwanted paint.

**Q:** Is disposal the only environmental issue with paint?

**A:** No. Volatile organic compounds, or VOCs, in paint are an indoor air-quality issue, but in recent years manufacturers have reduced the VOCs and other hazardous substances in many types of paint.

Few products have so much potential to brighten our surroundings, as long as we don't paint ourselves into a corner with improper disposal.

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