



When establishing a garden on a brownfield site, it is important to know as much as possible about its historic use. A brownfield site is a former industrial, commercial, or residential site where future use is affected by real or perceived environmental contamination. The questions that should be asked and answered are: what was this property previously used for and who owned it? An innocent-looking vacant lot potentially harbors environmental problems that are not readily discernible, and previous nearby manufacturing or industrial facilities may affect the property.

You can obtain historic use information on a selected garden site in several ways.

Research Historical Use

Doing your own research is the cheapest method, but it involves spending some time and effort. Here is what to do:

- Go to your county courthouse to the registrar of deeds office and look through the recorded titles/deeds for the property in question. Most often, the recordings go back to the first time the property was built upon. If you encounter uses that may have environmental implications in your title search, such as former service station, dry cleaner, or manufacturing facility, it should indicate that



Without a records search, the historic use of these brownfield properties cannot be determined.

further investigation in the form of soil testing may be necessary. **Note:** Even former residential lots can have soils affected by lead (from lead-based paint and/or historic use of leaded fuels) and/or arsenic (from pesticides or naturally occurring arsenic in soils in some areas of the country).

- Locate historical records by going to your local historical society. Often, historical aerial photographs and other records will be available that mention previous uses of a property.
- Check out Sanborn maps from your local library/university library (not all libraries have them, but quite a few do) or state historical society. These are old fire insurance maps that are amazingly accurate. They often depict aboveground storage tanks and identify the uses of a property and adjacent properties over time. If you cannot borrow or look at Sanborn maps locally, these maps can be ordered online from Environmental Data Resources, Inc., the current owners of Sanborn maps, at www.edrnet.com. Historic Sanborn maps also can be obtained through the Library of Congress at www.loc.gov/rr/geogmap/sanborn.
- Ask your state environmental department or your regional EPA office if it has any records for the property in question. These records are available under the Freedom of Information Act.
- Ask your local fire department if it has responded to a spill on the property in question or if it has any information on the property.
- Talk to the current and former property owners and neighbors; they usually offer a wealth of information.

Walk across the property. Remnants of the most recent uses of the property may be found. Drums and other containers with unknown solids and/or liquids warrant the involvement of a professional, such as the fire department, the health department, or city or state environmental staff. Soils in areas of the property where vegetation appears stressed (not from lack of moisture) or where nothing grows should be sampled and tested.

Ask Local Government

If your local government owns the property, ask if a Phase I environmental site assessment was performed for the site as part of a property transaction. Also ask if your local government has an EPA brownfield grant under which they may be able to perform a Phase I site assessment (see website information in the “Resources” section for more information).

Ask the State Environmental Agency or Regional EPA Office

Your state environmental agency and/or your regional EPA office can perform Phase I environmental site assessments. These are called Targeted Brownfield Assessments/Brownfield Targeted Assessments and are performed free of charge, but are available only if you are an entity of local government or a not-for profit-organization. Please see www.gardeningtonbrownfields.org/p.aspx?tabid=33 for a list of state and EPA brownfield contacts.

If you have some resources available, you may want to use one of the following two options:

Hire a Title Search Company

You have to pay for this service, but you should get good information. Consult the yellow pages for your area to identify title companies.



Soils on this formerly residential brownfield site had elevated lead levels that would not have been apparent without soil testing.

Hire a Consultant

Hire a consultant to do a limited Phase I environmental site assessment of the site.

After the history of the site is known, an informed decision can be made about where and for what to sample the soil. Testing soils for lead is advisable regardless of historic use.

Resources

Information on Phase I Environmental Site Assessments is at www.engg.ksu.edu/chsr/outreach/resources/docs/7PhaseIEnvironmentalSiteAssessments022508_000.pdf

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