

HIDDEN PROPANE CAN BE DEADLY THE GAS DOES NOT DETERIORATE, WHICH MEANS IT IS DANGEROUS FOR YEARS.

By Tom Spalding of the Sarasota Herald-Tribune (FL)
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Buried treasure? Try buried terror.

Experts say abandoned propane tanks, like the one that exploded at a downtown Sarasota home last week, could lurk underground at as many as 1,000 residential or commercial properties in Sarasota County. The propane tanks, installed decades ago to provide heat to homes or pools, were placed by homeowners or private companies, so they were not regulated by the government and do not show up on survey maps.

Battalion Chief Verne Riggall, a hazardous-material specialist, says the problem has been corrected on new construction, but there is little that can be done for older properties.

"There's nothing wrong with a tank in the ground," said Tom Lucas, Sarasota operations manager of TECO Peoples Gas. "It's when it sits out of sight that things can go wrong."

They rust, start to leak, "or somebody hits them with a backhoe when they start digging," said Gary Weil, president of St. Louis-based EnTech Engineering, which uses ground-penetrating radar to help companies find tanks and other underground hazards. "Either way the results are the same - you get an explosion or a fire."

Propane in a tank does not deteriorate, making it dangerous for a long time, Weil said.

Publicity about Thursday's fire, which left a family of three homeless, have prompted some concerns among Sarasota residents. The Sarasota County Fire Department received calls Monday from two homeowners and a businessman worried about having tanks.

They were not in an emergency situation but were "real anxious to get rid of it," said Riggall, who is fielding phone calls on the matter. "I hope we get quite a few calls so we start to mitigate the situation."

Officials are trying to assess problem areas and devise low-cost, hassle-free solutions for people who want to remove the propane tanks.

Finding them is the tricky part.

Experts suggest that you investigate if you live on a property that dates to the 1940s or 1950s, or if you are unsure of the property's history. Homeowners can look for an unfamiliar dome or metal cover in the yard. Removing it could reveal a tank below.

But, through time, some tanks are buried under several feet of dirt, hiding the domes and making them nearly impossible to detect.

Homeowners can search the outside of the home for copper pipes that enter the ground and serve no purpose. Following the pipes might lead to an underground tank. Checking with the gas company or previous occupants is another recommendation.

A South Osprey Avenue family learned about the dangers of propane tanks the hard way Thursday, when construction

workers using a burrowing tool to install a telephone line pierced an abandoned tank.

Propane from the tank, which did not appear on survey maps, created a white cloud in front of a one-story wooden home rented by Mike Svedman and his fiancée, Cheryl Russo.

The gas ignited, causing an explosion felt for blocks and setting the home on fire. Russo, her 3-month-old baby, Katherine, and Russo's grandmother were able to escape. But Cheryl Russo's back is so sore that she can't lift her baby.

Southwest Florida residents have donated goods and money to help the family's effort to start over. In an emotional, on-air exchange Monday morning, disc jockeys David Jones and Christina Crane of WSRZ (106.5-FM) provided Svedman with more than \$500 from listeners' contributions, plus baby supplies.

Svedman wasn't angry at the workers. He's grateful that no lives were lost in the blast, thanks to his fiancée.

“She saved her mother and my baby,” Svedman said. “I don't know if I thanked her enough.”