

# SCIENCE NEWS®

The Weekly Newsmagazine of Science

A Science Service Publication  
Volume 141, No. 17, April 25, 1992

Alfred Scott McLaren	Publisher
Patrick Young	Editor
Laurie Jackson	Managing Editor
Vaughan	Editor
Janice Rickerich	Production/Design Director
Blair Burns Potter	Associate Editor
Janet Raloff	Senior Editor
	Environment/Policy
Ron Cowen	Astronomy
Bruce Bower	Behavioral Sciences
Elizabeth Pennisi	Chemistry/ Materials Science
Richard Monastersky	Earth Sciences
Carol Ezzell	Life Sciences/ Biomedicine
Kathy A. Fackelmann	Biomedicine
Ivars Peterson	Mathematics/Physics
Larry Norland	Editorial Assistant
Michael Stroh	Science Writer Intern
Connie Williams	Books/Resource Manager
Donald R. Harless	Advertising/Business Manager

SCIENCE NEWS (ISSN 0036-8423) is published weekly on Saturday, except the last week in December, for \$39.50 for 1 year or \$68.00 for 2 years (foreign postage \$6.00 additional per year) by Science Service, Inc., 1719 N Street, N.W., Washington, DC 20036. Second-class postage paid at Washington, DC, and additional mailing office. **POSTMASTER:** Send address changes to SCIENCE NEWS, 231 West Center Street, Marion, OH 43305. Change of address: Four to six weeks' notice is required — old and new addresses, including zip codes, must be provided.

Copyright © 1992 by Science Service, Inc. Title registered as trademark U.S. and Canadian Patent Offices. Printed in U.S.A.

**Editorial and Business Offices:**  
1719 N St., N.W., Washington, DC 20036  
(202-785-2255)  
Republication of any portion of SCIENCE NEWS without written permission of the publisher is prohibited.

**Subscription Department:**  
231 West Center Street, Marion, OH 43305  
For new subscriptions only, call 1-800-247-2160.  
For customer service, call 1-800-347-6969.

## Letters

### Tire wire

Your article on new uses for old tires ("Rubber to the Road," SN: 3/7/92, p.155) prompts me to ask about the steel wire that is included in radial tires. What does it do to the shredders? I think the wire is like piano wire — about the toughest steel there is — a pretty hard thing for steel shredder blades to digest. If the tires are burned for power production, what becomes of the steel? Does it melt into a puddle in the bottom of the furnace? Does it clog up the machinery? If the steel-containing tires are shredded for inclusion in asphalt roads, are there little slivers of steel that could be harmful to vehicles or people traveling on the road? Out of the total volume of tire material, is the steel enough to be worth reclaiming as scrap steel?

Dan Larson  
Downers Grove, Ill.

In the shredding process, says H. Barry Takallou of BAS Engineering Consultants, Inc., rubber

## This Week

- 260 'Sick' Buildings Exert Stressful Impact
- 260 Huge landslide threatens at Alaskan volcano
- 261 Panel OKs DNA fingerprints in court cases
- 261 Microwaving can lower breast milk benefits
- 262 Birth defect linked to decongestant drug
- 262 In the lab, it's octopus see, octopus do
- 262 Aye-aye! It's a boy!
- 263 Testing the fundamentals of helium theory
- 263 Hubble camera captures hottest star ever

## Research Notes

- 270 Biomedicine
- 270 Chemistry

## Articles

- 264 Murphy's Law

Cover: Even the quintessential inventor Thomas Edison, who established a large research facility in West Orange, N.J., likely suffered the glitches and gremlins that plague experimental work. Modern instrumentation and computers provide a host of new venues for Murphy's Law: If anything can go wrong, it will. (Photo: Ivars Peterson)

- 266 Tamoxifen Quandary

## Departments

- 258 Books
- 259 Letters

**Science Service**, a nonprofit corporation founded in 1921, gratefully accepts tax-deductible contributions and bequests to assist its efforts to increase the public understanding of science, with special emphasis on young people. More recently, it has included in its mission increasing scientific literacy among members of disadvantaged groups.

**Board of Trustees** — *Chairman*, Glenn T. Seaborg; *Vice Chairman*, Gerald F. Tape; *Secretary*, David A. Goslin; *Treasurer*, Willis Harlow Shapley; Joseph W. Berg Jr.; Robert W. Fri; J. David Hann; Dudley Herschbach; Shirley M. Malcom; Elena O. Nightingale; Ben Patrusky; H. Guyford Stever; Sanford J. Ungar; Deborah P. Wolfe. **Honorary Trustees** — Edward Bliss Jr.; Bowen C. Dees; O. W. Riegel; John Troan.

President: Alfred Scott McLaren; Vice President and Business Manager: Donald R. Harless.



tires are ground into pieces 1 inch or less in size and then passed through a magnetic field, which separates the metal from the rubber. Oxford Energy Co. in Dearborn, Mich., burns the tire with its steel belt and bead, then collects the metal's residue ash from the furnace and sells it as a by-product. — E. Pennisi

### Try it, you'll like it

*Ilex vomitoria*, locally known as yaupon (Catawba for little shrub), is mistakenly believed to have been an ingredient in the famous "black drink" mentioned by Leonard Glick ("Emetic symbolism," Letters, SN: 2/29/92, p.131). Folkways in this area suggest that the white and black brews were separate beverages made from different ingredients. According to Euell Gibbons in *Stalking the Blue-Eyed Scallop*, the association of *Ilex vomitoria* with the black drink was made in error — an error that persisted in the literature and resulted in the scientific misnomer *vomitoria*.

From personal experience I can attest that, rather than possessing emetic qualities,

yaupon makes a lovely (and stimulating!) tea, similar to maté or Chinese green tea.

John P. Mijac  
Myrtle Beach, S.C.

### Iron-poor plants?

"Garden-Variety Tonic for Stress" (SN: 2/8/92, p.94) confirms a practice I have been following for years in my backyard farming. I feed my crops Geritol. This results in healthy, vigorous growth in plants free of fertilizer residue. An added bonus is that small animals don't like the smell of the solution.

Debi Treweek Nehila  
Modesto, Calif.

Address communications to:

Editor, SCIENCE NEWS  
1719 N St., NW  
Washington, DC 20036

Please limit letters to 250 words.  
All letters subject to editing.