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ALSO IN THIS ISSUE:

32 BE GREEN WHILE YOU CLEAN
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expert advice

Be Green While You Clean

Nontoxic cleaning products and elbow grease can save money and the environment.

BY ROBIN MURPHY

Spring cleaning season has arrived! Whether you're cleaning the kitchen, bathroom, furniture, windows, or even clothing, it's easy to be green when tackling your seasonal chores.

STANDARD CLEANING PRODUCTS MAY BE HARMFUL TO YOUR HEALTH

Even the most innocuous household cleaning products likely contain chemicals that may be carcinogenic, toxic, or irritating to the skin and other organs. Non-green cleaning products have been linked to asthma, ADHD, autism, birth defects, immune system disorders, and even cancers. In fact, using them may actually be increasing indoor pollution. Products with potential carcinogens, toxins, corrosive ingredients, or volatile organic compounds (VOCs) should not have a place in a green home.

HEALTHY ALTERNATIVES ARE AVAILABLE AND AFFORDABLE

The household vacuum may be a source of indoor pollution. Many models spew dust and particulate matter such as pollen, pet dander, and mold spores back into the air. The Carpet and Rug Institute, a nonprofit trade group (carpet-rug.org), places its seal of approval on vacuums that meet its high standards for removing and retaining small particles.

Microfiber cloths and mops are reusable alternatives to paper towels and traditional cloths. Microfiber is comprised of a scientifically-developed weave that attracts and retains dirt and dust without a lot of chemicals. Water may be all that's necessary for chores such as light dusting. The cloths are machine washable and highly durable.

If you're curious about what's in your products, visit the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Household Products Database at householdproducts.nlm.nih.gov for health and safety information.

Choose products based on what they do not have: chlorine bleach, synthetic dyes, fluorocarbons, propellants, and ingredients that are harmful to the body. Don't rely on ill-defined terms like "biodegradable" or "natural," because their use is not well regulated.

Choose green products that are sold at health food and natural stores, through the internet, and in mail-order catalogues. Popular green brands include Seventh Generation and Mrs. Meyer's Clean Day. If you use a cleaning service, be sure it uses safer products and certified green equipment like vacuums.

TOUGH JOBS GO GREEN

Even the toughest jobs can be done green. The first step is to stock up on a few inexpensive, easy-to-find ingredients: baking soda, borax (check the laundry section of your local market), coarse salt, white vinegar, lemons or lemon juice, and microfiber cloths. Then follow the tips below for a sparkling, green home.

In the kitchen

- Remove stains from cutting boards by scrubbing with salt sprinkled onto a lemon half. When you're done, grind the lemon halves in the garbage disposal along with ice cubes to clean and deodorize.
- To add shine to pots and pans, scour with coarse salt, kosher salt or baking soda; use a lemon half for extra cleaning power.
- Wipe and disinfect counters with isopropyl alcohol.
- Periodically pour baking soda down kitchen sink, followed by a white vinegar "chaser" to fizz away clogs. Rinse with boiling water.
- To clean the oven, mix baking soda with water to form a paste. Spread the paste over the oven surface, leave overnight, and scrub off in the morning. Or, you can spray with a solution of two tablespoons of liquid soap, two teaspoons of borax, and water. Allow the mixture to penetrate, and then wipe or scrub off.
- To remove silverware tarnish, place in a large aluminum pan, with each piece touching a part of the pan. Alternately, line a large pan or bowl with aluminum foil. Sprinkle the silverware with two tablespoons of salt and cover with boiling water. After about an hour, remove the silverware, wash, rinse, and polish. Silverware also shines up when scrubbed with salt and a lemon half.

In the bathroom

- To tackle stubborn toilet stains, combine borax and lemon juice into an abrasive paste, spread on the stains, allow to stand for two or more hours, then scrub. Wipe down porcelain surfaces with cream of tartar sprinkled onto a damp microfiber cloth.
- Use a plastic "barbed" snake or a straightened wire hanger to pull hair out from bathroom drains. Then pour in baking soda followed by white vinegar and then hot water.

For furniture

- Use dryer lint as a soft "cloth" for shining delicate wood surfaces on furniture. For antiques, clean and shine with olive oil on a microfiber cloth.



PHOTO COURTESY MAID BRIGADE

FOR A GREEN WAY TO CLEAN THE KITCHEN SINK, SCRUB WITH WHITE VINEGAR AND BAKING SODA THEN SHINE WITH A MICROFIBER CLOTH.

For the windows

- Make your own window cleaning solution by mixing together two cups of water, 1/4 cup white vinegar, and about 1/2 teaspoon of liquid soap in a spray bottle. The soap helps dissolve wax residues left behind by conventional window cleaners.

For clothing

- Here's another reason to stock up on lemons: lemon juice helps remove perspiration stains from clothing.
- Choose a detergent that does not contain harmful irritants like chlorine, phosphates, synthetic dyes, and perfumes. ■

Robin Murphy is president of Maid Brigade, the Green Clean Certified™ maid service whose teams utilize green processes. Visit maidbrigade.com or call (888) 525-6243.