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Environmentally friendly cleaning products erase grime but let environment shine

Homemade products tackle dirt and grime but leave the environment alone

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Margot Weinberg has been buying organic groceries for her family for several years. But after the pediatrician took part in a two-year fellowship in integrative medicine, she has broadened her view on human and environmental health.

"It brought into focus that everything you are exposed to is important in terms of health," says the Pittsford mother of three. She weaned herself off the conventional bleach scouring scrubs and ammonium glass cleaners and started buying environmentally preferable cleaning products. After reading an article earlier this year about an environmental group promoting homemade green house-cleaning recipe parties (similar to Tupperware parties, but with a do-it-yourself twist), she threw her own get-together.

Now her kitchen sink and counters shine from homemade formulas made with pre-industrial household staples such as baking soda, vinegar and salt. And she shared the gospel of clean and green through her Raising Healthy Kids class series recently offered through the Pittsford recreation department.

"The main issue with many commercial cleaning products is that they are not disclosing their ingredients. With your own formula, you at least know what's going in there," says Ann Blake, a scientific consultant for Women's Voices for the Earth, the group sponsoring the green cleaning parties.

Manufacturers of cleaning products are not required by law to list ingredients on labels. Some do, though.

In 2007, WVE published a report on chemicals in common household cleaning products that are linked to asthma in janitorial and cleaning workers and developmental problems and reproductive problems in lab animals and humans. The chemicals highlighted in the study are monoethanolamine, a surfactant found in all-purpose cleaners; ammonium quaternary compounds in disinfectant sprays; glycol ethers, such as 2-butoxyethanol and alkyl phenol ethoxylate, in all-purpose cleaners; and phthalates in fragrances used in glass cleaners and deodorizers.

The organization followed up the report with a green cleaning party campaign to encourage women and their families to limit their exposure to potentially harmful chemicals.

"I'm not someone who has ever questioned my cleaning products at all. ... But these recipes do a better job than a multitude of products that I bought and then pitched because they didn't work," says recent convert Renee Jacobson of Pittsford, a friend who attended Weinberg's first green

cleaning party. Jacobson is especially enamored with the all-natural all-purpose cleaner, which keeps her stainless steel appliances streak-free.

In some cases, as with cleaning ovens, you have to think differently on how to clean, says Blake. For example, you may need to apply the formula and wait an hour or two to let it work. You may need a little more elbow grease or different tools to get the job done.

Blake believes that for the majority of households, these homemade solutions keep kitchens sufficiently clean. "You can remove germs by cleaning effectively. ... You don't need antibacterial soaps or disinfectant cleaners in most cases," she says. (The exception might be for an immune-compromised person, she adds.)

For homemade spray cleaners, WVE recommends investing in good-quality spray bottles, available at janitorial supply stores.

Just because these cleaning supplies are less toxic than some conventional commercial counterparts, caution should still be taken to protect skin and eyes and avoid ingestion. Also, be sure to label them and keep them out of reach of children.

Weinberg does not recommend throwing out all your conventional cleaning products. Instead, replace them when they are finished with your DIY greener formulas.

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Creamy soft scrub

This scrub works on kitchen counters, sinks and stoves. To use, wet surface to be cleaned, pour scrub on sponge or cleaning cloth and scrub away. Rinse. For exceptionally tough jobs, spray surface first with full-strength or diluted vinegar; let sit; and then follow with scrub. Vegetable glycerin can be found at some drug and health food stores. From www.womenandenvironment.org.

2 cups baking soda ½ cup castile soap

4 teaspoons vegetable glycerin

5 drops essential oil such as tea tree, rosemary, lavender, lemon or orange

Mix together and store in a sealed glass jar. It should last for two years.

Drain opener

From www.womenandenvironment.org.

½ cup baking soda

½ cup vinegar

Pour baking soda down the drain and follow with vinegar. Cover and let sit for at least 30 minutes. Flush with boiling water.

Dishwasher detergent

From Margot Weinberg.

1 cup Borax 1 cup baking soda

1/4 cup salt

1/4 cup citric acid

30 drops essential oil (optional)

Mix all ingredients thoroughly and store in an airtight plastic container. Use 1 tablespoon per load.

Basic liquid dish soap

From Margot Weinberg.

1/4 cup soap flakes or grated Ivory soap bar 2 cups hot water

1/4 cup vegetable glycerin

1/2 teaspoon essential oil (lemon or tea tree oil)

Let soap flakes dissolve in water. Add glycerin and oil. Let cool. Funnel into squeeze container.

Oven cleaner

From www.wswmd.org/recipes#dish.

1 tablespoon liquid soap

1/2 cup water

1/4 cup salt

3/4 cup baking soda

Mix soap and water together in spray bottle and spray the oven surfaces with soapy water. Mix salt and baking soda and sprinkle on wet surface. Spray again so that the mixture is damp and pasty. Let stand for several hours. Scrape off with putty knife or wet pumice stone. Rinse and wipe dry.

All-purpose cleaner

Use this for cleaning refrigerators, microwaves, countertops, floors and cabinets as well as glass and mirrors. To make this even more effective on tough jobs, heat the mixture until barely hot in a glass container. Will keep indefinitely. From www.womenandenvironment.org.

2 cups distilled white vinegar

2 cups water

20 to 30 drops essential oil (optional)

Mix and use immediately or store in spray bottle.
