



Homemade Housekeeping

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Standing in the grocery aisle, I used to read the warning labels on commercial cleaning products and wonder if cleanliness was worth the risk of chemical exposure. Many cleansers contain known toxins and irritants and have to be disposed of as hazardous waste. Common sense told me that extreme measures were not really necessary to get my house clean. And I didn't like the fact that commercial brands are expensive, use extraneous packaging, and require energy to produce.

Some companies have fanned germ-paranoia by trumpeting "anti-bacterial" soaps and cleansers. However, there's no evidence that using these products makes a home any healthier. Such agents kill bacteria indiscriminately, even the beneficial microorganisms that prevent disease. Additionally, some consumers may forgo regular, effective hygiene (washing with soap, rinsing with running water, and thoroughly drying off), choosing instead to rub on an anti-bacterial cream or sanitizer, assuming it will do the same job. It won't. While hospitals, nursing homes, and day-care centers require thorough disinfecting, for most homes, soap and water is still the best way to clean up.

Learning these facts convinced me to make my own cleaners. Homemade cleaners are cheap and work just as well as store brands, using tried and true ingredients such as vinegar, baking soda, borax, rubbing alcohol, and olive oil. An added bonus: I can use them without donning a hazmat suit.

So, to establish a new habit, I had to get prepared. I searched books, magazines, and the Internet for advice and recipes. I found that most homemade cleaning products are very simple, requiring one to three ingredients. Undiluted white vinegar, for instance, works magnificently on its own: I can use it as a fabric softener, to clean the toilet bowl, to remove scale from my shower head, and to remove mildew. Baking soda is also effective by itself to scour sinks, help unclog slow drains, and remove odors from the refrigerator.

Before I could re-supply my utility closet, though, the old stuff had to go. Since some commercial cleaning products do contain toxic materials, I didn't want to pitch them. Landfills and local watersheds are no place for these substances. My local solid waste management program's website has a convenient guide to safe disposal of household chemicals. Empty aerosol cans went into regular recycling, but full ones needed to go to my local hazardous waste recycling center, along with the container of hydrochloric acid, leftover carpet cleaner, and metal and wood polishes. Ammonia-based cleaners could be poured down the drain, although I checked the label to make sure they were safe for my septic system. I rinsed out my leftover plastic spray bottles to refill with my new homemade solutions—but I checked those labels, too, to make sure it was safe to re-use them.

For convenience, I wrote down the recipes I knew I would use frequently

on 3 x 5 cards and pinned them to a bulletin board above my utility sink. I put the ingredients on a nearby shelf for easy access. If I was going to do this, it would have to be as easy as possible.

If I choose not to make my own formulations but don't want to use the commercial ones, there are safer options now on the market: for instance, plant-based cleaners such as Clorox's Green Works lines are widely available; other brands can be found at health food stores or on the Internet. There are dozens of companies, such as Ecover and Seventh Generation, that offer a wide array of products specializing in "green" cleaning.

It feels empowering to say "no" to cleaning products that come with a heavy cost for my family and for the planet. Now, if I could just get my kids to clean their rooms! ■

Recipe for an All-Purpose Cleaner

Mix in a spray bottle: ½ cup of white vinegar and ¼ cup of baking soda (or 2 teaspoons of borax) plus a ½ gallon of water. Use for showers, chrome, windows, mirrors, and other surfaces. (Source: www.eartheasy.com)

Recipe for a Homemade Glass Cleaner

Mix in a spray bottle: 1 cup of rubbing alcohol, 1 cup of water, and 1 tablespoon of white vinegar. (Source: <http://organizedhome.com>)

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