



NATURAL CLEANERS

There is no precise definition of 'natural'. Some would use it only for individual substances, preferably commonly available and not manufactured. Others would accept mixtures manufactured without substances derived from petrochemicals.

Why not use commercial products?

They are manufactured using energy and raw materials. . They create packaging waste and cost money. They may contain chemicals harmful to us or polluting in water, air and soil.

There is rarely added benefit from using antiseptic products over plain soap and water. Some antimicrobial chemicals have harmful effects and may not be removed during water treatment.

Sunshine is an effective disinfectant.

Corrosive or caustic cleaners, such as caustic soda and acids are found in drain cleaners, oven cleaners and acid-based toilet bowl cleaners. Some cleaning ingredients, such as paradichlorobenzenes used in toilet fresheners and room deodorizers, and formaldehyde used in disinfectants and furniture polishes, are possibly cancer-causing. Others, containing petroleum-based surfactants called alkylphenol ethoxylates (APEs), don't biodegrade as easily as other surfactants and can disrupt hormone functions in animals and possibly humans. Chemicals from different cleaning products can also react with each other to produce toxic effects.

Chemical cleaners pollute ecosystems as well as indoor air. For example, phosphates, the water-softening mineral additives used in most dishwasher detergents, over-nutlify rivers and streams, causing algae to grow profusely. Overabundance of algae deprives fish of oxygen and results in declining populations. Many cleaning ingredients are toxic to aquatic animals and fish. Aerosol spray disinfectants and solvent-based spot removers contain volatile organic compounds (VOCs), which pollute the air and contribute to smog. Warnings on containers often do not list the full range of chemicals nor all potential toxicity. So-called inactive or inert ingredients are not necessarily benign.

When commercial products must be used, select those which are non-toxic, biodegradable, low phosphate, and are manufactured by companies regarded as ethical. To identify ethical products, see the booklet Guide to Ethical Supermarket Shopping published by the Ethical Consumer Group www.ethical.com.au. These are distributed by Sustainable Communities SA Inc., tel. 08 8363 2295 email bmylius@chariot.net.au.

Keep it simple

Simple cleaners include water, soap, salt, lemon juice, vinegar, baking soda (sodium bicarbonate), washing soda (sodium carbonate), borax and ammonia. They can often be mixed together. Natural cleaners may be slow to act. If so, leave the solution in place for some time then rub vigorously.

Water alone and a plain cloth or a microfibre cloth eg Enjo or equivalent will do many tasks.

Soap and water will do most other tasks. If the water is hard, soap will leave an insoluble film on clothes and dishes and detergent will be necessary.

Salt (sodium chloride) is mildly abrasive and useful for scouring. Cooking salt is coarser and therefore more abrasive than table salt.

Lemon juice cuts grease, removes perspiration and other stains, and is a mild bleach.

Vinegar (acetic acid) (white vinegar) cuts grease, removes stains, softens water, dissolves scale and pulls dirt out of wood. Vinegar removes stain in the toilet bowl. Vinegar and glycerine remove the greasy feel sometimes left on plastic utensils after washing. Vinegar and unprocessed wheat bran in a small bag made from panty-hose can be used as an eraser to remove soiling from suedette furniture.

Baking soda (sodium bicarbonate) is a mild abrasive which cleans, deodorizes, removes stains, and softens fabrics. Combined with vinegar, baking soda produces foam of carbon dioxide. Use on a damp cloth rather than a dripping wet cloth.

Washing soda (sodium carbonate) cleans clothes, softens water, cuts grease, disinfects, increases the cleaning power of soap and is useful as a scourer.

Borax: (sodium borate) kills mould and bacteria, bleaches, deodorizes, removes stains, and boosts the cleaning power of soap. Mixed with sugar borax kills ants.

Ammonia cuts heavy grease but fumes irritate eyes and lungs. Use ammonia only when other cleaners are not effective. Ammonia mixed with bleach releases chlorine.

Recipes

The ingredients can be used in various combinations and proportions.

All-purpose cleaners – apply one or other mixture and wipe clean.

- Vinegar alone
- Vinegar and salt mixed together
- Baking soda in warm water
- Vinegar, washing soda, vegetable oil based liquid soap, hot water
- Borax in water

- Borax in vinegar
- Borax in lemon juice and water
- Borax, washing soda, lemon juice
- Ammonia, vinegar, baking soda and warm water

Oven cleaner

- Baking soda, water; salt; vegetable oil-based liquid soap
- Salt, baking soda, water. Plug the holes in the oven with aluminium foil and spread the paste. Avoid getting any on metal parts. Leave overnight. In the morning, mix: water and vinegar and spray the oven, wipe off and rinse with clean water
- Last resort: Fill a small glass bowl with full-strength ammonia, place in oven and close. Let stand overnight, then wipe loosened dirt with paper towels or newspapers

Microwave

- Baking soda or lemon juice or vinegar in water in a bowl. Microwave uncovered for five minutes on high or until the liquid boils and condensation builds up inside the microwave. Leave for another three minutes. Open the microwave, remove the bowl, wipe down

Dish washing

- Dishes: Add baking soda to soap
- Pots and pans: Soak or boil a solution of baking soda in each pan. Let stand then wash

Laundry

- Add washing soda to water before adding clothes and substitute soap flakes or powder for detergent
- Bleach with lemon juice in water

Surfaces – benches, baths, tiles, grout

- Soap or lemon juice diluted with water
- Baking soda and rub with a damp cloth
- Mix together baking soda and liquid soap
- Vinegar alone or diluted
- Vinegar and baking soda
- Half a lemon dipped in borax

Floors

- Warm water with vinegar for wood; warm water with drop of mild detergent for other floors
- Vinegar with vegetable oil

Windows

- Water on a microfibre cloth (Enjo or equivalent) wiped off with a squeegee; Spray with vinegar. As an acid, vinegar will strip off dirt from the street
- Ammonia, which is alkaline, does a better job of removing the fat that accumulates from cooking
- May wipe dry with crumpled newspaper

Furniture polish

- Vegetable oil eg. olive oil with lemon juice or vinegar
- Lemon juice, olive oil and water

Bathroom

- Vinegar and water
- Rust stains: mix cream of tartar with water, wash off
- Shower heads: To remove deposits clogging the holes, soak the head in vinegar and water

Toilet

- Warm water with soap or detergent
- Vinegar alone
- Baking soda or baking soda and vinegar
- Borax alone, borax and lemon juice or borax and vinegar

Stains

- Pre-soak material in a solution of washing soda or borax in water
- Coffee/Tea Stains: rub with baking soda paste
- Organic material: glycerine dabbed off with warm water

Carpets

- Deodorising: sprinkle with baking soda then vacuum
- To clean and deodorise, mix corn meal (polenta) or cornstarch with borax. Sprinkle liberally, leave one hour and then vacuum
- Red wine stains can be removed from carpet by rubbing baking soda in and vacuuming. Grease spots: sop up the liquid then rub corn starch or baking soda into the spot. Leave overnight. Next day, remove the excess and vacuum

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