

## One Green Thing



# A Truly Clean Sweep

Many of the products we use to keep our home spick-and-span have a dirty secret: toxic chemicals. Here's how to clean without compromising your health—or the planet's. *By Elizabeth Royte*

→ **WHEN WE HAUL** out the mop and bucket, we want to conquer grit, grime, and the germs they carry. But the virtue of scrubbing is marred by a nasty reality: Skin irritation, asthma, fertility disorders, and cancer have all been linked to chemicals in conventional cleaners, which also pollute our waterways and harm the environment.

"Many mainstream cleaning products contain unnecessarily hazardous ingredients," Rebecca Sutton, PhD, a senior scientist

with the Environmental Working Group, says. For instance, petroleum distillates, found in kitchen and furniture cleaners, are derived from oil sources and can cause damage to the nervous system and lungs. Phosphates, an ingredient still found in

**Companies are** using new technology to develop stronger plant-based products.

*May We Help You?*

some dishwashing detergents, can increase algae growth in waterways, robbing aquatic life of oxygen. Triclosan, common in antibacterial products, may disrupt thyroid function.

Some products have the potential to harm us while we use them; others leave pernicious fumes that linger. One EPA study found that organic air pollution was two to five times higher indoors than outside, thanks in part to cleaning-spray vapors and disinfectant fumes. According to the American Thoracic Society, using conventional cleaners even once a week may increase the risk of developing adult asthma.

And while there are many indications that antimicrobial household products (which may be labeled "antibacterial" or simply "disinfectant") can harm the environment, "there's no evidence that they provide any extra protection from germs," Sutton says.

If you want to balance a cleaner home with a greener planet, you could roll up your sleeves and DIY (the Web abounds with recipes that mix baking soda and vinegar or lemon juice with plenty of elbow grease). Or you can buy a household cleaner that's eco-friendly. Long considered the wimpy kid sister to conventional cleaners, these green products have gotten stronger in recent years. Companies are using new technology to develop more effective plant-based cleaning agents in lieu of hazardous chemicals.

As you compare packaging, ignore claims like "natural" or "eco-friendly," which aren't regulated, and instead look for third-party eco-labels, like Green Seal and EcoLogo, and the EPA's Design for the Environment. Phosphate-free, chlorine-free, and petroleum-distillates-free are all great claims, though if cramming chemistry isn't your thing, you can check out [goodguide.com](http://goodguide.com), which rates cleaning supplies on their health, environmental, and social impacts.

To make your spring cleaning even easier, turn the page for a selection of the products we found most effective.

# Green Cleaners That Really Work

We found safer, eco-friendly alternatives to conventional cleaners—and asked some dirt-averse O staffers to put them to the test.

## Method Smarty Dish Dishwasher Detergent Tabs

### THE CLAIM:

Biodegradable and free of phosphates, chlorine, ammonia, and petroleum distillates. The lightweight packaging uses 87 percent less plastic than traditional rigid plastic containers.

### THE CLEAN:

"Whatever's in that tablet whisked away remnants of Bolognese sauce, oatmeal, and scrambled eggs. Turns out our 7-year-old Maytag has more oomph left than I thought; I just needed a better detergent."

—JENNY BAILLY, EXECUTIVE BEAUTY EDITOR

## Bill by Eco-Me All-Purpose Cleaner

**THE CLAIM:** Uses only ingredients that are food-grade and plant-sourced, such as vinegar and sugar-based cleaning agents. Free of phosphates, chlorine, and petroleum distillates.

**THE CLEAN:** "With a husband who likes to walk while he eats, I'm constantly wiping down surfaces. A single squirt of Bill cut through everything from the barbecue sauce stains on the stovetop to the filmy residue on the countertops."

—JESSICA SILVESTER, ASSISTANT EDITOR

## Green Works Oxi Stain Remover

**THE CLAIM:** An oxygen-based bleaching agent helps make this cleaner versatile, biodegradable, and nonallergenic.

**THE CLEAN:** "Having pets made me hesitant to use a heavy-duty shampoo on my dingy mosaic of carpet stains. But 20 minutes after I sprinkled this powder, my cats were sprawled out on a carpet that positively sparkles."

—KATE ROCKWOOD, SENIOR EDITOR

## Caldrea Dish Soap Liquid

**THE CLAIM:** Biodegradable and free of phosphates, chlorine, and petroleum distillates. Plant-based cleaning agents are sourced from certified sustainable palm-oil farms.

**THE CLEAN:** "At first I found the quaint packaging and citrusy aroma of essential oils suspect. Surely they couldn't peel the charred remains of a veggie burger from my favorite pan. But they did."

—MEREDITH BRYAN, SENIOR EDITOR

## Bon Ami Liquid Cleanser

### THE CLAIM:

Biodegradable and free of phosphates and chlorine. The packaging is made from 100 percent postconsumer recycled plastic.

**THE CLEAN:** "I figured without harsh chemicals, I'd need a lot more elbow grease. But the nastiest surface of all—the toilet—was rendered spotless with just a few lazy swipes of my toilet brush."

—KATIE ARNOLD-RATLIFF, ASSOCIATE EDITOR

## Mrs. Meyer's Clean Day Glass Cleaner

### THE CLAIM:

Skips ammonia (a potentially toxic irritant) in favor of plant-based cleaning agents sourced from sustainable coconut-palm-oil farms. Free of phosphates, chlorine, and petroleum distillates.

**THE CLEAN:** "The nozzle mists, so there's great coverage and I used less. With one pass of a cleaning rag, my windows and mirrors were clear."

—CRYSTAL G. MARTIN, ASSISTANT EDITOR

## Method Floor + Surface Cleaner

**THE CLAIM:** Biodegradable and free of phosphates, chlorine, and petroleum distillates. The packaging is made from 100 percent postconsumer recycled material.

**THE CLEAN:** "It easily lifted my terrier's muddy footprints from tile, a maple syrup spill from the kitchen floor, even unidentified drips down my garbage can—no rinsing required."

—CATHERINE DIBENEDETTO, ARTICLES EDITOR

