

A consideration of traditional home cleaning products

DEAR MS. GREEN,

What do you think about making your own cleaning products to avoid the chemicals and toxins in commercially available, traditional cleaners on the market?

Dirty in Durham

DEAR DIRTY,

The answer to this question falls in the realm of preaching, as opposed to practicing, because while Ms. Green would like to clean her house using all natural products, she is a traditionalist in the cleaning department. As much as she is ashamed to admit this in a column devoted to living "green" she admits that she equates the idea of cleanliness with the smell of bleach and the piney woods. So in her case, trying to use toxin-free products often involves standing in the cleaning aisle, staring at interesting, new, expensive cleaning products and then reaching for the Soft Scrub and Pine-Sol. Ms. Green loves Soft Scrub and Pine-Sol.

But let's look at the reality of Ms. Green's old favorites. According to a study commissioned by Women's Voices for the Earth (<http://www.womensvoices.org>), Pine Sol contains two substances that may be harmful when used in the home: Toluene, which can cause complications in pregnancy, and Limonene, which is a



Lemon juice, baking soda, and vinegar are just three natural ingredients you can use to make your own equally effective, and much cheaper, cleaning products. A short time on the internet will yield lots of recipes.

possible allergen. Ms. Green was unable to find anything specific about Soft Scrub, although of course it contains bleach, which can be a skin irritant, cause liver damage, and can act as a neurotoxin in high enough doses.

Of course, both Pine Sol and Soft Scrub are potentially poisonous when ingested by people or animals, and they should never be mixed together, but for Ms. Green this is a duh moment. We're talking about using these products as they are intended.

So, to answer your question, Ms. Green admits that she uses many products that are not 100 percent natural or non-toxic and can probably do better. She is not choosing these traditional cleansers because she thinks they're harmless, but because they're a habit and because she's too cheap to buy more expensive alternatives and too lazy to make her own. That said, there are plenty of non-toxic alternatives out there, but be cautioned about products that say they're "green" when in reality that's simply the color of the liquid or the packaging. A product that says "98% non-toxic," is still 2% toxic, so buyer-beware.

But, as you mentioned in your question, it's very possible to make your own cleaning products. Ms. Green has several friends who swear by lemon juice and vinegar and baking soda in place of commercially made products. Many of their houses are very, very clean. Now, Ms. Green might not go all the way and follow their lead but your question has made her think a little more about the chemicals in her household.

DEAR MS. GREEN,

This past winter I weatherstripped my

windows to try to increase my home's energy efficiency, just like you advise, but

now there's mildew growing on my shower ceiling. I don't like to run the fan because it's too noisy. Should I pull off the weatherstripping and crack the window or what? This is the first home I've owned and I don't want to ruin it in the first couple of years. You better give me a good answer because I consider this mildew to be your fault.

Sinky in Saxapahaw

DEAR STINKY,

Calm down, buddy! Yes, I'm sure I advised air-sealing your home to increase energy efficiency, and I'm very pleased to read that you weatherstripped your windows versus taking the radical, expensive, and cost-ineffective choice of replacing them, but it is absolutely not Ms. Green's fault that mildew is growing on your bathroom ceiling. It is your fault. Well, specifically, your fault in not running your bathroom fan. Because noisy or not, the purpose of your bathroom fan is to provide controlled ventilation to your bathroom so that the moist air created when you shower or bathe can be vented to the outside. Yes, the outside. Not to your crawl space or your attic (Ms. Green has seen several bath fans vented to attics. Gave her a tension headache on the spot!).

If your fan is noisy, here's your solution: get a new fan! Contemporary fans are quiet, energy efficient, and highly effective at controlling moisture in your bathroom. The cost of a new fan, including installation by an electrician, but not including ducting (because we're assuming your current fan is already ducted) should be around \$250. You'll want to choose a fan that's no more than 1.5 sones (a sone is a measure of loudness).

Consider it an investment in your home's durability. Moisture in the home is a nuisance, but over time it can be very destructive. A good fan can give you the ventilation you need, but in a controlled way, which is what you don't get by leaving leaks unplugged or cracking a window.

Ms. Green is the combined effort of Adrienne and Mark Bashista, co-owners of Home Performance NC, an energy auditing, energy rating, and home weatherization contracting company. They can be reached on the web: www.homeperformancenc.com and by phone: 919.360.1570

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