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## HOME & GARDEN

### Household solutions: When green meets clean

By EVE MARX

**T**ired of your house looking dirty? Noticing how fingerprints on the woodwork have drastically multiplied? Aware that the grout around the tub could politely be called taupe even though you know it was white when you installed it? Hmm. Sounds like it's time for a vigorous spring cleaning, but how do you get it clean and keep it green? That's the challenge.

Consumers are more savvy than ever about green cleaning due to the bounty of new information regarding the harmful effects of toxins found in everyday cleaning products. This wealth of information has made grabbing for the big name brand detergent or cleanser on the supermarket shelf virtually unconscionable as all of us must now be careful label readers. When you think how the most well-known name brand cleaning products used for years are now targeted as being at least in part responsible for the epidemic of childhood allergies and asthma, it's scary.

The Consumers Union, an independent group whose mission is to research consumer marketing practices, has evaluated numerous environmental terms on product labels and found them to be mostly meaningless. These terms include words bandied about every day: eco-safe, environmentally friendly, environmentally preferable, environmentally safe, green and nontoxic. Standards to legally define these terms do not exist. It is solely the manufacturer's choice to use any of these terms to sell their cleaner.

According to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, the average American home is five times more polluted than the outside air, in large part because of toxic cleaners. This is why it is more important than ever to pay attention to what you're using to clean your home. According to Diana Tyler at Kelloggs & Lawrence Hardware in Katonah, while there are lots of old fashioned cleaning recipes using white vinegar, baking soda, borax, olive oil and washing soda, it's nice when the products are already



PHOTO COURTESY OF MAID BRIGADE

**Green products are not only safe, but effective.**

made and come ready to use. Kelloggs & Lawrence carries the full line of Mrs. Meyers cleaning products that are all natural and guaranteed to be green. The store also carries products made by the companies Natricks and Holy Cow, plant- and organic-based products which are naturally green.

Tyler recommended that people switch to using rags instead of paper towels. "It's unconscionable how thousands of prime trees have been cut down for paper towels," she said. She mentioned Marcal toilet paper because it is 100 percent recycled, information she said she learned at the Bedford Environmental Summit.

Another product she recommends is CLR, "an old standby that people have used for years to de-funk coffee machines, their dishwasher, even the toilet." She also recommends buying products in multiples and stashing them in different locations around the house. "If it's close at hand, you use it," Tyler said.

Robin Murphy at Maid Brigade of Westchester and Fairfield said her company is certified through the not-for-profit Green Label testing program. "We use Green Seal certified products

that remove 99.9 percent particulates and asthma and allergy triggers, including mold, must, mildew and animal dander, pollen and dust," Murphy said. Details about Maid Brigade products can be found by researching the company's Web site, [www.westchestercountymaidbrigade.com](http://www.westchestercountymaidbrigade.com).

What to look for in a cleaner can be found by reading labels. Look for products that contain minimal VOCs (volatile organic compounds), which means they have decreased or eliminated harmful fumes, are biodegradable, contain no aquatic toxins and have safe fragrances. And while home recipe products like baking soda are excellent cleaners, remember they do take longer to work (allow 10 minutes) and may require more elbow grease than commercial products.

Be especially cautious when using disinfectants. Disinfectants don't remove dirt, but they do kill microorganisms such as bacteria. Contrary to popular wisdom, antibacterial products do not produce a "cleaner" clean. Regular, old-fashioned soap is still the best thing for removing dirt. Disinfectants make a surface sterile. Harsher products such as

disinfectants should be used sparingly, as they can de-rail your septic system, which relies on bacteria to function properly.

Chlorine bleach, the most common disinfectant, contains chemical compounds that are extremely toxic to human health. Oxygen bleaches have not been proven to have the same disinfecting capabilities as chlorine bleach. The next time you're in the store, look for hydrogen peroxide bleach and remember to leave it on for at least 10 minutes to kill germs. Simply spraying and wiping only exposes you to harsh chemicals without getting the cleaning job done.

Cleaning Authority, a national home cleaning corporation with local franchise affiliates across the country, like Maid Brigade, is also dedicated to using only Green Seal certified products, along with HEPA vacuums and microfiber mops and dust clothes. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services recommends using microfibers. Cleaning Authority uses a trademarked "Detail Clean Rotation System" that cleans your home twice, first cleaning the kitchen and bathrooms before the rest of the house. On the second clean, they detail the sleeping and living areas and then go back and do the kitchen and bathrooms again. Their methods and products promise to reduce pollution, conserve resources and minimize global warming, according to the Web site.

It's true that unless you stick to the grandma-tested recipes of cleaning with vinegar and baking soda, both inexpensive, readily available products, ready-made green cleaners do cost a bit more. This is because small companies make these products, which raises the price point, Tyler said. "Cost is a huge factor and habit is another," she said. A big selling green product at Kelloggs & Lawrence are CSL bulbs. "They've really caught on," Tyler said. "One of the reasons people like compact fluorescent bulbs is that they are one little thing you can do to help the planet, plus the bulbs are cost effective because they last five years." —