

# Cleaning House: What Went Wrong?

By Linda Mason Hunter

My Grandma Nelle used vinegar and water for most household cleaning tasks. She had a few baking soda tricks up her sleeve, and later added and scouring powder to her cleaning cupboard. She didn't know it, but today we'd call such habits "green."

"Green" means seeking the least harmful solution for both environmental and human health reasons. If you live green, you strive to reduce your negative impact on the planet in small, everyday ways, living with nature instead of trying to subdue it. It means choosing alternatives that have less of a toxic impact on your home and the environment.

A good place to begin a program of green living is by evaluating your household cleaning products. Green cleaning is simple, yet powerful, both intimate and global. By choosing eco-friendly formulas and tools, you transform your shelter into a place of comfort and health while doing your part to protect local waterways, soil, and landfills, promoting the health of the entire community. We can, as Gandhi implored, *be* the change we wish to see in the world.

## **Soap: A Brief History**

I am a child of the 1950s, prepubescent witness to the advent of television in every living room. With "Howdy Dowdy" and "Winky Dinky's

"Magic Window" came commercials for an increasing array of household cleaners. Though only seven or eight years old, I watched in wonder the early evolution of video advertising.

Household cleaning products were some of the first products advertised. After a couple of years, the same brand promised "New Improved" making me question: What was wrong with the product in the first place? What was added to make it better? Why does it matter?

During the 1960s synthetic chemicals initially developed for warfare found their way into America's cleaning products and into our homes. Cheerful ads promised to get clothes "whiter than white," "cleaner than clean," and bring "sparkle" to the toilet bowl. "Better living through chemistry," as a popular advertising slogan from DuPont proclaimed.

To date, according to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, more than 75,000 synthetic chemicals are registered; 250 billion pounds produced each year in the U.S. alone. Only a fraction of them have been tested for human health concerns.

We're beginning to learn just how harmful exposure can be. One recent study, for example, conducted over 15 years, found that women who work at home have a 54% higher death rate from cancer than those who work outside the home. Scientists concluded this was a direct result of increased exposure to toxic chemicals, many of which are found in common household products. Not good news.

The cleaning aisle of a typical grocery store contains more than 400 synthetic household products, everything from all-purpose cleaners, disinfectants, glass cleaners, carpet cleaners, polishes, pesticides, stain removers, oven cleaners, toilet bowl cleaners, mold and mildew removers, spot removers, and air fresheners. Our near-obsession with cleanliness has become an \$18 billion industry that pollutes the environment, harms our bodies, and may endanger future generations.

We've become dependent on these chemicals. The average American family uses 40 pounds of commercial cleaners a year. Whenever we have a housekeeping problem—whether a coffee stain or mold and mildew or a dirty kitchen floor—we reach for a commercial product concocted in a laboratory, a brew of harsh chemicals designed to get the job done quickly but almost never gently or even safely.

## **Buyer Beware**

Scientists at the National Toxicology Program found 150 chemicals present in the home are associated with allergies, birth defects, cancer, and psychological disorders. Some of these chemicals may be in common household cleaners. They include:

- Ammonia: Glass Cleaners may contain ammonia. The fumes from ammonia can irritate the skin, eyes and respiratory system.

- Aromatic hydrocarbons (naphthalene, organic solvents, trichloroethane): Used in degreasers, deodorizers, air fresheners, all-purpose cleaners, liquid laundry detergent and pesticides. Many are likely human carcinogens.
- Alkyphenols: Found in multisurface cleaners, liquid laundry detergent. May have hormone-disrupting effects.
- Butyl cellosolve: Found in metal polishes and grease removers, a petroleum-based solvent that can irritate nasal passages and cause liver and kidney damage.
- Phthalates: Found in air fresheners, multipurpose cleaners. May cause birth defects and reproductive disorders.
- Petroleum distillates: Found in floor waxes, furniture polishes, degreasers, all-purpose cleaners. Can damage lung tissues and dissolve fatty tissue around nerve cells.
- Chlorine: Found in sanitizing and bleaching agents, tub and tile cleaners, and pesticides. Ranks high in the causes of child poisonings in the U.S. and may cause reproductive, endocrine and immune disorders.

You get a whiff of their unnatural odor just walking down the cleaning products aisle of a grocery store. You can tell they're harsh during use because they redden your hands, make your eyes water or your nose run.

At the same time our industrial lifestyle is harming our bodies, it is polluting the environment. Phosphates, nitrates, and borates in detergents essentially “kill” lakes and streams by causing algae to grow out of control. Toxic waste is another problem; the average home generates over 25 pounds of hazardous waste each year, much of which can be attributed to cleaning products. Tap water, too, is a concern. Many synthetic chemicals – from agriculture, industry and household cleaners -- end up polluting rivers and streams, eventually finding their way to the local wastewater treatment plant. And because utilities are only required by law to test for 87 of the most harmful chemicals and microorganisms, many synthetic chemicals are not treated and can easily end up in your tap water. Such alarming facts have spawned a growing interest among consumers of green products.

But it is “Buyer Beware” in the marketplace. The prevalence of “greenwashing” muddies the waters, confusing consumers. When investigating whether a company has “green” credentials, look for these words:

- \* Biodegradable
- \* Formulated without dye
- \* Nonflammable
- \* Contains no ammonia, acids, alkalis, solvents, phosphates, chlorine, nitrates, or borates

\* No volatile organic compounds

Searching out eco-cleaners with integrity is worth the extra effort because home is a place where you can take control. By switching to healthy cleaners, you do your part to make the earth a healthier place for all living things.

## **SIDEBAR**

### **Home Green Home**

Good planets are hard to find. We should do everything we can to minimize our destructive impact on this one. Here are some suggestions for greening your home:

- Shop wisely. Buy green products whenever possible.
- Avoid excess packaging.
- Purchase products that are easily recycled.
- Purchase unbleached paper products.
- Replace incandescent light bulbs with compact fluorescents.
- Choose furniture made of natural fibers, whole wood, metal and glass.
- Avoid using aerosols.
- Use low-VOC paints and low-VOC adhesives.
- Don't use chemical pesticides on your lawn or garden.

- Have your air conditioning and heating systems inspected annually.
- Reduce, reuse and recycle.
- Conserve water. Fix leaky faucets and install low-flow showerheads.
- Drive a fuel-efficient vehicle (40 miles per gallon or better); or bike, walk, car pool, or ride the bus to work and run errands.

*Linda Mason Hunter is the co-author of Green Clean, \$16.95, Melcher Media, 2005 and Creating a Safe and Healthy Home, \$21.95, Creative Publishing International, 2005.*