

## Doing What Comes Naturally

I love the smell of laundry. Tide and Downy are better than Paloma Picasso, my favorite expensive fragrance. But I'm a sucker for anything that's "natural" or "biodegradable," though I always—usually—check "natural" products out before I buy them.



Shaklee, Amway, Seventh Generation, Method, and other cleaning and personal products are kind to the environment. But I'm cheap as chips and like to experiment with cleaners made from lemon juice, vinegar, and other things found in most households. Since I enjoy pretty containers, I buy bright-colored spray bottles, squeeze bottles,

and jars, and I glue waterproof labels on them listing the ingredients and their proportions.

Do I investigate the processes involved in making these plastic containers? Do I make sure they're recyclable in case they break and have to be discarded? No, I do not.



If you make your own cleaning solutions, don't mix them with commercial cleaning products, and don't mix commercial cleaning products with each other or use them together. People have died from the toxic fumes created by chlorine bleach mixed

with ammonia, for example.

You can clean yourself, your house, your kids, and your pets without buying a single brand-name product or one with unpronounceable ingredient names. All you need are *ammonia*, *lemon juice*, *white vinegar*, *vegetable oil*, *borax*, *baking soda*, *washing soda*, *salt*, *rubbing alcohol*, *peroxide*, and *plain soap*.

### *In general...*

- Ammonia works well on gunk. You can soak your jewelry in a weak solution, or use a stronger mix to remove floor wax. Follow the

directions on the bottle. Ammonia (plain, not the sudsy kind) also clarifies windows. Never use ammonia undiluted except to clean the oven, as described below, or outdoors.

- White vinegar dissolves the minerals in hard water. If your windows aren't clean after you've washed them with ammonia and water, use a vinegar-and-water solution. Wipe the windows with newspapers or with a chamois. Vinegar also deodorizes; the vinegar smell disappears when it dries.
- Lemon juice clarifies and brightens. It has a slight bleaching effect. It's acidic, like vinegar, and dissolves mineral stains. You can clean a white sink by rubbing it with salt and half a lemon.
- Peroxide can be used instead of chlorine



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bleach to whiten porcelain—sinks, bathtubs, and so forth. You just have to give it a while to work.

- Salt is, obviously, abrasive, so it's good for scrubbing. It also softens water and discourages the growth of bacteria, which is why, in the days before refrigeration, fresh meat was preserved in salt. The drying properties of salt make it indispensable for soaking fresh stains out of carpets.

### *Conserve and recycle*

If I'm fanatical, environmentally speaking, about anything, it's paper. I can't think of a single good reason for bleaching paper towels, paper napkins, or toilet paper. I buy 100-percent-recycled paper towels and toilet paper processed chlorine-free

(PCF). Instead of chlorine, the manufacturers use oxygen, ozone, or hydrogen peroxide.<sup>2</sup>

Recycling gets easier all the time. Just before I left Tucson, the city distributed blue dumpsters the same



This Central Arizona Project aqueduct carries water from the Colorado River to Tucson

size as the green dumpsters they gave you for trash. You didn't have to sort the recycling or smush the cans and milk bottles. You just threw newspapers, magazines, junk mail and other miscellaneous papers, glass bottles, plastic containers, even phone books into the recycling bin. No worries about the stuff getting rained on. No special trips to phone-book-recycling sites.

In Tucson, on the other hand, water costs an arm and a leg plus a couple of internal organs. That's how the city "encourages" water conservation. Any time I turned the faucet on and had to wait for the water to heat up, I stuck a milk jug or a large plastic bucket in the sink or tub to catch the cold water. (It got to be a habit. I still do it, except in the shower, I confess.) What do you do with the water in these jugs and buckets? Give it to your plants, refresh the dogs' water dishes, and pour what's left in the washing machine.

### Some of my favorite environmentally friendly cleaning and personal-care tips

*Disclaimer:* I would be a big fat liar if I said that I, myself, employ all these practices. In fact, I have in my shower, as I write, one of those battery-operated doodads that spray the shower for you when you push the button. I bought it after I tried a cleaning tip that had disastrous results: polishing my shower tile with car wax. It might have worked fine if I hadn't used Turtle Wax, which turned the lovely brand-new white grout Turtle Wax Green.

<sup>2</sup> TCF—totally chlorine-free—papers are made from virgin timber. PCF paper is recycled without the use of chlorine from paper that might or might not have been chlorine-bleached. The chlorine-bleaching process produces dioxin and other toxic substances that make their way through air and water into the food chain, reaching their highest concentrations at the top of the food chain—in mammals (including humans) and other animals—contributing to cancer, infertility, diabetes, and other maladies.

I have, however, successfully tested most of these suggestions, and I hope you find at least a few of them useful.

### Cooking

*Baking soda in the cooking water* moderates the gas-producing effect of beans in soups and chili. Cover the dried beans with water, boil for two minutes, turn off the heat, make sure the boiling has stopped, and stir in a teaspoon or two of baking soda. Cover and soak for at least two hours. Drain and rinse the beans well.

### Gardening

*I'm not one of your compost purists.* I just hate to waste anything, even food scraps. For a very small garden, you can make a compost bin out of a large plastic storage container with several half-inch holes drilled in the bottom and sides (*not* like the one pictured, which is for indoor composting).



Odorless indoor composting bin

Line the inside of the container with nylon screening and make sure it's heavy enough to stay put when it's windy. ♦ Start with a thick layer of leaves. Add coffee grounds, vegetable and fruit peelings (not bananas), and grass clippings. Throw in some yeast and

sterilized potting soil or steer manure if you want to hurry the process a bit. Don't use any animal products or grease unless you want to attract flies and create nasty odors. (Made properly, compost doesn't stink. Really.) Also avoid adding weeds, diseased plants or those recently sprayed with chemicals. ♦ Stir or shake the mixture when you add new material. Keep it moist and covered. You'll know when it's ready—it will be dark and rich and crumbly.

*Kill isolated weeds* (in sidewalk cracks and garden plots, for example) with boiling water. Vinegar kills weeds too, but it also gets into the soil and could harm nearby garden plants.

*Water your plants with used dishwater.* The organic matter nourishes the plants. Some experts recommend using Dawn dishwashing liquid if

you're going to apply it to plants (in homemade insect spray or used dishwasher), but I use Seventh Generation or my own recipe and it hasn't killed anything that I know of. My neighbor in Tucson, Carol-across-the-street, had a nifty setup whereby her washing machine emptied into the garden through a long hose. Somebody told me it was illegal to recycle so-called gray water that way. I thought it was a silly law, the water situation in Arizona being what it is. After all, they water the golf courses with sewer water!



*Pothos thrives almost anywhere indoors, grows quickly, and is easily propagated by placing cuttings in water.*

## Household

Keep drains running clear with yeast, enzyme-based products, your WaterPik tooth washer, or a household steamer with one of those pointy attachments. Periodically, when I've just used warm water in the bathroom or kitchen sink, I pour a little Biz (enzyme stain remover) down the drain. If your sink or bathtub drains slowly, put hot water in your WaterPik receptacle, attach the skinny tubular tooth-cleaning part, stick it into the drain, and turn the WaterPik on full force. In a minute or so you'll hear the water running freely in the drain.

*Dump salt—never water—on a grease fire.*

*If you have a septic tank, try to avoid using chlorine bleach in your laundry or household cleaning. It kills the beneficial bacteria that break down the solid waste.*

Our house in Tucson had a septic tank, and I noticed that immediately after I used chlorine bleach in the wash, our house started to smell like a feedlot. Sometimes all I had to do was use Biz the next time I did a load of laundry. Otherwise I'd flush yeast, or enzymes sold especially for septic tanks, down the toilet.

*Potted plants, especially those with large leaf surfaces, clean your indoor air. Watch for signs of mold on the soil, though, or you'll do more harm than good. Don't let a lot of dust accumulate on the leaves.*

*To deodorize your house, pour baking soda into pretty jars, unlidged, and set them around the house. Replace the soda every few months.*

*For furniture polish, mix lemon juice and vegetable oil.*

*To remove mineral buildup from your coffeemaker or steam iron, run equal parts water and vinegar through them when they're hot. **Iron:** Leave on for five minutes, unplug and let cool, then empty the water and the particles that the vinegar has dislodged. **Coffeemaker:** With the device turned on, run the vinegar mixture and then two cycles of clear water through. (You won't have to demineralize the coffeemaker often if you use filtered water to make coffee.)*

*Use equal parts of vinegar and hot water for anything you want to clean, shine, and deodorize—a thermos or sports bottle, the refrigerator, sinks and showers, and so forth.*

*Pour salt on doggie accidents (as well as wine spills and grease spots) on carpeting. If there's poop, scoop it up carefully (so you don't press the wetness into the carpet. If the pup only winkled on the rug, blot it carefully, again without pressing. Then cover the wet places with salt. Don't skimp. When the salt is completely dry, vacuum it up.*

*To remove glued-on labels from glass, plastic, and other hard surfaces, vegetable oil works as well as, or better than, commercial goo removers.*

*You can fill a nail hole with white toothpaste, or you can mix equal parts of salt and corn starch, adding enough water to make a thick paste.*



## Bathroom

*As a daily no-rinse shower spray, use one part white vinegar, three parts water, and a few drops of tea-tree oil.*

*To clean the toilet bowl, first empty it partially by shoving the toilet-bowl brush rapidly into and out of the outlet. The water level will sink below the ring. Make a thick paste of baking soda and vinegar, apply it with the brush to cover the ring completely, let it sit for a few minutes, then scrub.*

