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Party guests whip up a baking-soda-based cleanser for kitchen use. (Lisa Schroeder)

How to be clean and green

Parties promote natural, make-it-yourself alternatives to store-bought cleansers.

By [Lisa Schroeder](#) | Contributor to The Christian Science Monitor/ October 23, 2008 edition

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EAST ISLIP, N.Y.

On a brisk fall evening on New York's Long Island, party guests gather in Barbara Weir's home to chat about the news and whip up batches of eco-friendly cleaners.

Green-cleaning parties – where guests create quick, easy, and cheap environmentally-friendly household cleaners in a festive setting – is a fast-spreading grass-roots effort pioneered by Women's Voices for the Earth (WVE), an advocacy group based in Missoula, Mont.

The party concept started when WVE put out a report in 2007 called Household Hazards in which they examined more than 200 chemical ingredients in commercial cleaners. The report found that many of those chemicals were harmful to the environment as well as "linked with asthma, infertility, birth defects and reproductive harm," says WVE spokeswoman Ali Solomon.

The group decided the best way to reach consumers about this issue and offer alternatives to store-bought cleaners was through a fun party. WVE spent months researching do-it-yourself green

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cleaners (they tested and perfected the recipes with professional cleaning companies), created a party kit, and launched their first party on March 20 this year.

The party idea quickly spread by word of mouth and there now have been more than 450 nationwide.

At Mrs. Weir's in East Islip (after snacks and a DVD on commercial cleaners), the guests were ready to make ecocleaners. They gather around a kitchen countertop lined with natural ingredients. Baking soda, distilled white vinegar, vegetable glycerin, castile soap, olive oil, and essential oils would soon become all-purpose cleaner, soft-scrub, and furniture polish. These would be decanted into the old spray bottles and glass jars that guests had brought.

After looking over recipe cards, everybody starts measuring, stirring, and exclaiming how easy and fun it is. "That's it?" says Kate. She'd just stirred together equal parts vinegar and water, and was done making the all-purpose spray. Kate tries it on a bathroom mirror, as Weir jokes that she's free to try it on all the glass doors as well.

Some of the chemicals of concern in the WVE study, commonly found in laundry detergents, all-purpose sprays, and disinfectants, include: alkyl phenol ethoxylates (found to harm aquatic animal and plant life), monoethanolamine, ammonium quaternary compounds (both linked to asthma), glycol ethers and phthalates (linked to fertility and reproductive problems).

Greg van Buskirk has been a Clorox scientist since 1980. "I do believe that misinformation is causing people more concern than is justified by the actual data," he says. Clorox rigorously tests all its products, says Dr. van Buskirk, so "the risk of people getting something like cancer or birth defects is zero." Also, "there's "no significant impact on the environment due to bleach usage," he says.

But these commercial cleaner studies only look at single household use, says Ann Blake, an environmental and public health consultant. The chemical ingredients are cumulatively dangerous, she says. "What the fish and wildlife are getting is a constant dose of [chemicals] at low levels," says Dr. Blake. "And that's what's causing the environmental disruption."

"In the past, some cleaning product ingredients have been directly linked to environmental problems such as eutrophication [oxygen deprivation] of water bodies, and foaming in streams," says Environmental Protection Agency Press Officer Dale Kemery – most famously in the 1950s through the early 1970s. "Some commonly used cleaning product ingredients offer room for improvement even today."

Although governmental bodies regulate traditional household cleaners, some don't think the government is doing enough to protect consumers from chemical ingredients. Consumer advocate Debra Lynn Dadd, who has written on the subject since 1982, attributes her previous health problems to chemical cleaners. "The consumer has to take responsibility themselves and say 'I'm not going to buy that toxic product,'" she says.

In response to this consumer demand, many commercial manufacturers are coming out with natural lines, like Green Works from Clorox. Spokeswoman Aileen Zerrudo says the line is plant-based and lists all ingredients on product labels as well as on their website. It has "grown the natural cleaning category by over 150 percent since we launched," she says.

But Weir's guests note that store-bought natural cleaners are costly. "Homemade all-purpose cleaner is 38 cents, and store brand costs \$4 to \$8," party guest Melissa reads from a WVE pricing comparison. That's another reason to make your own cleaners, they agree.

Although making your own eco-friendly cleaners is easy and economical, precautions should be taken, as with normal cleaners. Clorox's Zerrudo cautions that because there are no chemical preservatives, the formula might not stay stable over time and could "grow bugs or bacteria." WVE's recipes claim that essential oils, distilled vinegar, and vegetable glycerin are natural preservatives, but recommend refrigerating cleaners made with lemon juice.

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Homemade cleaners can be effective, says EPA's Kemery, as long as the right proportions are used, "but it is likely that they will not perform as well as a commercially available product."

Back in Long Island, the new ecocleaners are getting rave reviews. "It's really shiny – wow," says Barbara Weir after polishing her wood dresser with olive-oil-based polish. And, sums up Melissa as she tries the soft-scrub on a kitchen sink, "it smells like you're at a day spa, but you're really cleaning."

Greener Cleaners

These are from the Women's Voices for the Earth (WVE) party.

All-purpose cleaner (for countertops, windows, mirrors, kitchen floors):

2 cups white distilled vinegar (other vinegars will stain surfaces)

2 cups water

Optional: 20 to 30 drops essential oil (orange, peppermint, etc., for scent)

Mix in a spray bottle, apply to surface, and wipe off. WVE recommends using an industrial-strength spray bottle (a clean, empty Windex bottle, for example), as vinegar degrades ordinary plastic bottles.

Creamy soft-scrub (for bathrooms, stoves, countertops):

2 cups baking soda

1/2 cup liquid castile soap (Dr. Bronner's, for example)

4 teaspoons vegetable glycerin (a preservative)

Optional: 5 or more drops essential oil

Mix together in bowl, store in sealed glass jar (shelf life: two years). For cleaning, apply some soft-scrub on sponge or rag, scrub and rinse.

Clogged drains:

1/2 cup baking soda

1/2 cup vinegar

Pot of boiling water

Pour baking soda into drain, then vinegar. Cover and let sit for at least 30 minutes. Flush with boiling water.

For more recipes and information on how to host or attend a green-cleaning party, go to:

womenandenvironment.org.

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