

THE WINDSOR STAR

The green clean

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White vinegar is a great natural cleaner, deodorizer and disinfectant.

Photograph by: Chris Mikula, Postmedia News, Postmedia News

Over a decade of marriage to a fabulously funny, "big picture" guy (read: lovable slob) has somewhat dulled my German/Russian-bred tendencies towards hyper-cleanliness and order.

The addition of two fun-loving, imaginative kids (read: prolifically messy) brought me to a crossroads: Either I would spend my life spinning in circles of constant cleaning or I would have to make peace with the fact that this is a messy stage of life, learn to turn a blind eye and keep my sanity intact. Happily, I chose the latter and we have a "warm but well lived-in" house to prove it.

Still, there are certain moments where my German roots unearth themselves in a big way -unleashing an insatiable urge to scour, cleanse, launder and polish my way to near-perfection. Winter's end and Earth Day triggers my annual compulsion for a major spring house cleaning.

While I'm not David Suzuki's love child -I live in the suburbs and yes, I do drive a minivan - I am a closet environmentalist at heart. So when it comes to buying housecleaning products, I try to look past the dazzling array of fragrance choices and delve a little deeper into the ingredients list.

It's no secret that many products are corrosive to the eyes and skin, can cause illness when inhaled or swallowed and may contain carcinogenic chemicals.

But how do you actually make an informed, environmental choice when it comes to buying household cleaners? Grocery stores and big-box retailers such as Loblaws, Walmart and Canadian Tire stores offer an array of products -both sides of an entire aisle are dedicated to cleaners and detergents from big-brand companies. But does that mean they are more reputable from the "green" perspective? Or are they just money-hungry capitalists stamping their products with brightly coloured, happy text bubbles that read, "Earth-friendly!" or "Softer

on the environment!" in a blatant ploy for attention from earth-conscious consumers?

The truth lies somewhere in the middle. But the good news is that Ottawabased TerraChoice has developed a simple and proven process for helping consumers to select truly green products: The EcoLogo label.

"There are about 500 'green' labels in North America and many of those are simply self-declared," says Angela Griffiths, executive director of the EcoLogo Program developed by TerraChoice, a science-based, environmental marketing agency that helps grow sustainable companies in North America and beyond.

This means that many companies are, in fact, "greenwashing" -or misleading consumers about their environmental practises and benefits of a product or service. Last year, TerraChoice launched a major study on greenwashing. The results, which were announced in October, revealed that more than 95 per cent of consumer products claiming to be green are committing at least one of the "Sins of Greenwashing." Nonos include things such as environmental claims that are so vague they are meaningless, making an irrelevant claim or outright fibbing.

Griffiths, who holds an impressive laundry list of degrees, including a doctorate in resource management and environmental studies, a master's degree in microbiology and an honours bachelor of science in genetics, says even she sometimes gets confused when reading lists of ingredients on consumer cleaning products.

To separate the wheat from the chaff, says Griffiths, we have third party organizations

that test and certify worthy products. EcoLogo is just one -but there are others, such as Green Seal in the U.S (greenseal.org).

"One of the reasons we promote labelling is that it's very difficult for consumers to differentiate and choose the right product," says Griffiths. "Consumers can make better choices by educating themselves as to what is a good green label."

The Global EcoLabelling Network is the non-profit umbrella association for all thirdparty environmental performance recognition, certification and labelling organizations around the world. This means that its members offer up legitimate programs to test the claims of household products.

"We look at the actual testing of chemicals," says Griffiths of the EcoLogo program. "For cleaning products, we look at human toxicity, aquatic toxicity, biodegradability as well as packaging and performance of the product. We certify hundreds of cleaning products for different purposes, such as glass cleaners and general purpose cleaners."

Griffiths explains that EcoLogo develops detailed, rigorous standard for products in collaboration with science experts, ENGOS and consumer groups, regulators and industry. These standards outline exactly what a product has to achieve in terms of environmental performance in order to be certified as EcoLogo.

In a 2010 greenwashing study, TerraChoice made an interesting finding -big-box retailers actually stock more "green" products and more products that provide legitimate environmental certifications than smaller "green" boutique-style stores.

"The big-box stores have the space and the resources, so they have the ability to can introduce a broader product line if they want to," explains Griffiths. "If you look at Rona - they have introduced a whole ecooptions program.

"If you can switch and realign some of the big-box stores to carry legitimate environmental products, the change can be huge and swift," Griffiths says.

Beatrice Olivastrì of Friends of the Earth (foecanada.org), a charitable, non-profit organization that serves as a national voice for the environment, suggests that people try making some of their own basic "green clean" solutions to use around the house.

Olivastrì takes a simplified approach to her own home cleaning. "Where I like to start is with the basics -like using white vinegar around the house; I have to have it and I use it for everything," she says.

If you're looking for a starting place for mixing your own household cleaners, Toronto-based Savvy-Mom (savvymom.ca) offers up quite a few, as does David Suzuki blogger Lindsay Coulter (davidsuzuki.org).

TOOLS OF THE TRADE

Here's the shortlist of everyday items you can use to clean your home:

Baking soda: Also known as sodium bicarbonate, baking soda is a natural substance that maintains the pH balance. Neutralizing both acids and bases, it actually eliminates odours rather than just covering them up.

Lemon: The acidity of lemons provides antibacterial and antiseptic properties for

cleaning. Attack countertop stains by allowing lemon juice to sit on the stain for a few minutes, then scrub the area with baking soda.

Olive oil: Once called 'liquid gold' by Homer, olive oil is typically derived from the tree crop of the Mediterranean. Excellent for wood polishing -but use a bottle of inexpensive domestic olive oil and save the expensive Greek variety for your saute.

White vinegar: Vinegar is a great natural cleaning product, as well as a disinfectant and deodorizer. The strong smell quickly dissipates as it dries.

Old newspapers: Read, then reuse (and subsequently recycle!) your old newspapers to clean mirrors and windows. Cuts down on the volume of paper towels used for cleaning.

Rags: Give your sad, stained fabric dishcloths, face cloths and T-shirts a second life by adding them to your rag basket.

CLEANING CONCOCTIONS

Sonia Mendes gets down and dirty to test-drive homemade cleaners:

FLOOR CLEANER

1/2 cup vinegar

1 gallon water

Mix in a bucket to mop or scrub floors. (Source: SavvyMom).

Writer's note: After a thorough sweep, I opt to try this out on the bathroom floor. I realize we don't actually own a mop anymore. So I get down on my hands and knees with some

rags. The result? Pretty impressive, if I say so myself.

CARPET DEODORIZER

2 cups baking soda

4-5 crumbled bay leaves

1/2 cup cornstarch

1 tbsp ground cloves

Mix. Sprinkle on carpets. Let sit up to 24 hours and vacuum. For stains, sprinkle baking soda, rub in and let sit 1 hour. Scrub with stiff brush and vacuum out (Source: David Suzuki Foundation).

Writer's note: I don't typically deodorize my carpets, yet I was curious to try this one. Since our house is fully carpeted, we're always vacuuming so it seemed an easy way to leave a fresh scent in the house. That it did -I sprinkled the deodorizer in a test area and then left for about 3 hours. When I returned, I thought the smell was great -like fresh Christmas baking. My husband, however, disagreed. He thought the scent was overpowering.