

Know which labels to look for when using green cleaners

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(Photo: Special to the Statesman Journal)

Melissa Lindley has been purchasing green household cleaners ever since she can remember.

“We try to use things that are fragrance free or have essential oils, which don’t seem to irritate,” the Salem homeowner said. “Any time I’ve had to use a chemical-laden cleaner, it irritates my sinuses. I can feel it when I breathe and it dries out my skin. I prefer to use things that are gentler.”

Lindley grew up in a home with products labeled “free and clear” to avoid fragrances and other ingredients that can irritate the skin. In her own home, she also searched for products that create less impact on the environment, such as dishwasher and laundry detergents that don’t contain toxins that harm fish.

She’s not the only one who prefers green cleaners.

In spring 2017, the number of people in the United States who said they buy eco-friendly household cleaning products amounted to 51.38 million. The year before, 48.7 Americans said they buy these products, according to Statista, a worldwide company that analyzes market trends.

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More people turning to green cleaners means less impact on human health, indoor air quality and aquatic life, according to the federal Environmental Protection Agency and the Oregon Department of Environmental Quality.

Products with harsh chemicals can damage people’s skin, cause allergic reactions and trigger asthma, said Kevin Masterson, DEQ’s Toxics Coordinator.

Plus, the ingredients in those products end up going down the drain and can have serious impacts on waterways, including salmon-bearing streams.

More: [Oregon will require drinking water systems to test for algal toxins \(/story/news/2018/06/29/salem-water-alert-oregon-algal-toxins-test-oha/746671002/\)](#)

More: [Water Woes? Old news in Salem history \(/story/life/2018/06/29/water-woes-old-news-salem-history/36512361/\)](#)

“Individual households will not have a major impact on aquatic life,” Masterson said. “But the concern is about small amounts from many sources adding up to a problem.”

It’s why the Oregon Legislature passed a law in 2009 lowering the allowable level of phosphorus in household automatic dishwasher detergents. Coupled with a ban on phosphates in laundry detergents from the early 1990s, the idea was to decrease the amount of phosphorus discharged to waterways, where it increases weed growth and eats up the oxygen available for fish and other aquatic species.

Masterson warns consumers, though, to be careful not to get duped by cleaners claiming to be green when they are not.

The state and Marion County recommend three certified green cleaners when searching store shelves: Green Seal, UL Laboratories and the EPA’s Safer Choice program.

“One primary reason to use third-party certification is that in order to get certified they have to disclose their ingredients,” Masterson said. “If you see ‘fragrance’ on the label, that could be some of hundreds of different chemicals. Just having that knowledge is important.”



Green Seal is an independent nonprofit that uses a rigorous set of criteria and science-based testing before giving its stamp of approval. (Photo: Special to the Statesman Journal)

Green Seal is an independent nonprofit that uses a rigorous set of criteria and science-based testing before giving its stamp of approval. Not only does it look at health and environmental considerations, but also performance and quality. There were about 4,000 Green Seal products and services in 2015.



UL Laboratories' label indicates that a product's entire lifecycle — from harvesting of the raw materials to disposing of the byproducts — has minimal impact on the environment. The certification includes institutional and household cleaners, laundry detergents, hand soaps, paper products and plastic trash can liners.

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's Safer Choice label means that every ingredient in the product has been through an EPA review to determine it is the safest in its class. More than 2,700 products such as household cleaners, hand soap, floor care products and laundry detergents hold this certification.

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Each of these three certifications also require the product to be packaged sustainably.

Green cleaners have gotten a bad reputation for not being as effective as some of the harsher chemicals. But cleaning experts say that's not the case.

"Most of the green chemicals today are as strong as the non-green chemicals and they don't cost any more," said Todd Londin, owner of ABC Window Cleaners and Building Maintenance.

ABC Cleaners is one of three EarthWISE-certified custodial companies in Marion County. It means that they recycle, save energy, reduce waste and use non-toxic cleaners for all their jobs.

The EarthWISE program is a free business environmental assistance program of Marion County. To earn certification, a business meets criteria in six areas, including the use of green cleaners. There are more than 170 EarthWISE businesses and organizations in Marion County.

Recycling: [Fines await Salem, Marion County residents who put wrong items in recycling](#) [\(/story/tech/science/environment/2018/05/08/marion-county-recycling-rules-violation-mid-valley-garbage-recycling-association/586789002/\)](#)

Garten Services, another EarthWISE business, runs custodial operations in the Salem, Dallas, Corvallis and Eugene areas. The workers have enough experience to know that sometimes a new tool or a little elbow grease is what gets the job done.

"For toilet cleaning, we now buy long handle toilet scrubbers, which are more ergonomic," said Gaelen McAllister, Garten's Resource Development Manager. "Then our cleaners can spend more time scrubbing the toilet instead of using more chemicals."

For folks trying to save money (some eco-friendly products are expensive), homemade household cleaners are just as effective. Even the experts agree.

EarthWISE-certified AAA Cleaning has about 50 commercial and residential customers in the Salem area. Owner Jennifer Arends uses a homemade glass cleaner. She mixes water, vinegar and dish soap.

"My staff gives me valuable feedback about what they like about the enviro-friendly products," Arends said. "I am constantly trying new things ... they didn't like the green window cleaner because it streaked so we tried the homemade one and the crew liked it."

In most cases, homemade cleaners are made from ingredients residents have around the house anyway.

"Do-it-yourself cleaners are cheap, easy to make and nontoxic," said Alan Pennington, Marion County's waste prevention specialist. "They make the most sense for residents' homes and they are the safest for the environment once they are washed down the drain."



Garten Services custodial employee Jordan Clark uses a concentrated Green Seal certified cleaner that is diluted with water before use. Concentrated cleaners reduce waste and a preset dispenser ensures a consistent mix. (Photo: Special to the Statesman Journal)

Most cleaning jobs can be done with vinegar, baking soda and/or biodegradable soap. Want to polish your chrome appliances? Vinegar is perfect. Need to scrub that toilet bowl? Baking soda does the trick. Looking to wash the linoleum floor? A cup of white vinegar in two gallons of water will make it shine and disinfect it.

Homemade cleaners also reduce the amount of packaging material that needs to be trashed or recycled. Mixing up cleaning solutions at home can save dozens of containers a year per household.

In some cases, the tried-and-true products that have been around for decades are the best and also environmentally friendly. Bon Ami, first developed in 1886, earns props as a scouring powder that doesn't scratch surfaces. For AAA Cleaning crews, they prefer Bon Ami for a toilet bowl cleanser. Not only is it free of perfumes, dyes and bleach, it is cheaper than some of the eco-friendly toilet bowl cleaners.

"There are so many reasons to turn to green household cleaners," Pennington said. "It's good for your health, it's good for the air quality in your house, it's good for the environment and it can be good for your budget. There are really no downsides."

More information about Garten Services can be found at www.garten.org; AAA Cleaning at www.aaacleaninginc.com; and ABC Window Cleaners and Building Maintenance at www.abctwindowsor.co. To learn more about the EarthWISE program, go to www.mcEarthWISE.net or call 503-365-3188.

411 for green household cleaners

- For consumers trying to determine if their go-to household cleaners are safe, the Environmental Working Group's Web site rates more than 2,500 products on health and environmental impacts. Go to [ewg.org](http://www.ewg.org) (<https://www.ewg.org/>) and click on the EWG's Guide to Healthy Cleaning.
- Here is a great list of safe cleaning supplies you can make yourself with less waste:
<http://www.co.marion.or.us/PW/ES/disposal/programs/reduction/Documents/hhwflyer3.pdf>
(<http://www.co.marion.or.us/PW/ES/disposal/programs/reduction/Documents/hhwflyer3.pdf>)
- Here is a booklet with ideas for reducing toxics in your home:
http://www.co.marion.or.us/PW/ES/disposal/programs/reduction/Documents/hazardless_home_handbook_2006.pdf
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