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It's a 'BYOJ' party — Bring Your Own Jars

BYOJ green-cleaning parties are the latest rage as fears over commercial cleaners put a new shine on our grandmothers' concoctions

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LIVING REPORTER

The party was strictly "BYOJ" – Bring Your Own Jars.

The tables were spread not with canapés and imported caviar, but with tubs of baking soda, jugs of distilled vinegar and bowls of vegetable glycerin.

The 10 guests, sipping spring water from biodegradable bottles and nibbling organic locally made chocolates, discussed the health perils of chemical-laden household cleansers, and then got busy making their own furniture polish and creamy scrubs.

Hence the jars. Preferably glass.

"Everyone had a lot of fun," says Sameen Ashraf, who hosted the party in downtown Toronto earlier this summer. "They hung out way too long afterwards."

Green-cleaning parties – part "let's get-together," part "let's save the planet" – are slowly sweeping across the U.S. and Canada

The non-profit environmental group Women's Voices for the Earth, based in Missoula, Mont., launched the idea last March, offering party kits, including a video and six recipes for homemade cleaners, on its website, womenandenvironment.org.

"We're wonderfully surprised. It's really resonated with women who are taking this issue to heart," says the group's communications director, Ali Solomon.



FYI ON DIY

To learn more about do-it-yourself green cleaning, visit Women's Voices for the Earth website, womenandenvironment.org. The party kits – educational material, labels, recipes – can be downloaded for free or purchased for \$25, including shipping.

The Environmental Health Association of Nova Scotia also recommends safer alternatives. Visit lesstoxicguide.ca.

So far nearly 400 people have requested kits – 26 from Canada. "It snowballs," Solomon says. "People come to a party, enjoy it, then host their own." Like the Tupperware parties of yesteryear, but with a don't-buy-anything twist.

Ashraf is a convert. She now cleans her kitchen countertop with distilled vinegar and water and scrubs the shower with a medley of baking soda, castile soap and glycerine.

"Now it feels safe to go into the shower right after cleaning," says Ashraf, founder of True Human Rights Action Network.

Sheila Banerjee, a guest at Ashraf's gathering, rubs the lemon-olive oil furniture polish she made on her piano. "It leaves a lovely shine and smells natural," says Banerjee, who is planning to host a party herself soon.

Last July, Women's Voices for the Earth released a report on the potential hazards of home cleaning products, looking particularly at chemicals linked to asthma and reproductive harm. "We found more than 200 products containing the chemicals of concern," says Solomon.

When people asked for alternatives, the group didn't know what to recommend, since ingredient labelling is not required. "A lot of products may say they're green, organic or natural, but we don't know if it's true," says Solomon.

So the group gathered recipes for scouring as great-grandma did, and a local cleaning company tested them. Concerned that concocting the eco-safe products might seem daunting, the group hatched the back-to-basics party plan.

Hosts add flourishes. At a Connecticut party, guests wore green and ate all green food, from jelly beans to spinach pies. At a party in a Wall Street conference room, guests drank Windex martinis – vodka and blue Gatorade.

There's been: "Tracey's Toss the Toxins Party" in Pennsylvania; "Party for the Planet" in Texas; and "Moms Going Green to Clean" here in Newmarket.

At an Indian reservation in Montana this month, says Solomon, a booth was set up for people to make their own products as part of a pow-wow.

In Tottenham, north of Toronto, Sarah Burke used the party kit at a meeting of the Herb Lovers Guild. An environmental studies teacher, she played the educational video, set out lists of toxins in commercial products and provided the raw ingredients, including lavender oil for fragrance, for the 30 women to create greener cleaners.

"Some of the women were quite shocked about the different toxins they were releasing from everyday products," says Burke.

In Vancouver, Toxic Free Canada, formerly known as Labour Environmental Alliance Society, includes in its website and *Cancer Smart Guide* details on toxins in cleaners: toxicfreecanada.ca.

In Canada, ingredient labelling on household products is not mandatory but companies will begin doing it on labels or on websites in 2010.

Too little, too late, says Toxic Free Canada of the voluntary industry program. The group wants hazard labels on potentially dangerous ingredients, such as carcinogens or reproductive toxins.

Nancy J. White

RECIPES

All-Purpose Cleaner

2 cups white distilled vinegar
2 cups water
20–30 or more drops of essential oil (optional)

Tip: For tough jobs, microwave in a glass container until barely hot.

Creamy Soft Scrub

"And they were shocked to learn it's not law that companies list ingredients."

At one party, the host had postcards addressed to a prominent lawmaker for guests to explain serious concerns about toxic chemicals in cleaners.

At another gathering, guests brought their favourite commercial cleaners and called the 1-800 customer service numbers on the labels to complain about toxins.

"This is not just a Do-It-Yourself campaign," says Solomon. "It's a movement of advocacy."

2 cups baking soda
1/2 cup liquid castile soap (made from vegetable oil, not animal fat)
4 teaspoons vegetable glycerin (acts as a preservative)
5 drops antibacterial essential oil, such as lavender, tea tree, rosemary or any preferred scent (optional)

Furniture Polish

1/4 cup olive oil
1/4 cup white distilled vinegar
20–30 drops lemon essential oil

Shake well before using

Recipes from Women's Voices for the Earth, a non-profit environmental group.