

Spring-friendly cleaning

Effective homemade cleansers are safer for the planet and for you

By VIVIAN SONG, WOMEN'S VOICES FOR THE EARTH, GRAPHIC NEWS

Tracey TieF is inviting chaos into her kitchen.

The Toronto natural health practitioner will turn her kitchen into an experimental laboratory this week where 20 women will perform feats of old-fashioned granny alchemy -- the kind that fizzes and bubbles.

It's a new movement akin to iconic estrogen-fests like the Tupperware party, where domestic merrymakers oooed and ahhed at the newest petroleum-based tuna casserole vessel -- with matching lid.

TieF is hosting a Green Cleaning party in time for the spring cleaning season, showing others how to make safe cleaning products out of pantry ingredients like vinegar and baking soda.

"My interest is to show people they can clean with less expensive, simple ingredients and demystify that for them," TieF said.

It's a concept launched by Women's Voices for the Earth, an environmental group based out of Montana that's been railing against the environmental and health hazards of everyday cleaning products and cosmetics.

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"Until companies come clean, we feel the alternative is to make our own products," said executive director Dori Gilels.

The law doesn't compel companies to disclose chemical ingredients on products, Gilels points out, leaving consumers in the dark about toxins.

Earlier this month, the Canadian Consumer Specialty Products Association announced plans to start listing ingredients on cleaning products, air fresheners and detergents on a voluntary basis -- a move criticized by the Canadian Cancer Society and the Canadian Lung Association as insufficient.

Typical chemicals found in commercial cleaning products have been linked to cancer, neurological damage, respiratory and developmental disorders, as well as reproductive harm.

While an ingredient may not be toxic in isolation, combined with another chemical it can become dangerous, added Anne Steinemann, a professor of environmental engineering at the University of Washington.

"We just don't know the cumulative effect of long-term, low-level exposure," Steinemann said. "No work has been done about the toxicity of a combination of chemicals ... breathe bleach or ammonia (it's okay) but put them together and you'll pass out."

Similarly, despite the proliferation of cleaning products hitting the shelves purporting to be green, Gilels points out there are no standards in place for deciding what constitutes an eco-friendly product.

While there are certification programs like Green Seal and EcoLogo, "there's a long way to go," she said.

Marketing strategies have also successfully tapped into the cultural obsession with sanitation and hygiene, filling shopping baskets with antibacterial products capable of annihilating germs on a microscopically nuclear level.

But studies have repeatedly shown that antibacterial products only create resistant strains and weaken the immune system, Steinemann said.

"There's a false perception that you need strong cleaning solvents to be hygienic," she said. "What kills bacteria is friction. You don't need strong antibacterials ... it's not necessary and is leading to public health crisis."

Public health and environmental health are intimately linked, TieF points out.

"What's bad for our bodies is inevitably going to be bad for the environment."

NON-TOXIC CLEANING RECIPES

ALL-PURPOSE CLEANER

2 cups white distilled vinegar

2 cups water

20-30 or more drops of essential oil (optional)

Tip: Warming in microwave until barely hot will boost cleaning power for tough jobs. Only microwave in a glass container.

TOILET BOWL CLEANER

Sprinkle toilet bowl with baking soda, drizzle with vinegar, let soak for at least 30 minutes and scrub with toilet brush.

Tip: Let ingredients soak for a while to make for easy scrubbing, especially on persistent stains like toilet bowl rings

AIR FRESHENER

Place cloves, cinnamon sticks, allspice or other favourite scented spice in a pot of water, simmer for one to two hours.

Place baking soda in fridge or small enclosed spaces. Three slices of white bread absorb fridge odours. Place lemon slices in an open bowl in the kitchen.

DRAIN OPENER

1/2 cup baking soda

1/2 cup vinegar

Pour baking soda down the drain and follow with vinegar. Cover and let sit for at least 30 minutes. Flush with boiling water.

Tip: Prevent your shower from clogging by using a drain trap to catch hairs.

COMMON CLEANING CHEMICALS LINKED TO REPRODUCTIVE HARM AND ASTHMA

- Monoethanolamine (MEA) is a surfactant found in laundry detergents, all-purpose cleaners and floor cleaners.

- Ammonium quaternary compounds are disinfectants found in disinfectant sprays and toilet cleaners.

- Glycol ethers are solvents commonly found in glass cleaners and all-purpose spray cleaners.

- Alkyl phenol ethoxylates (APEs) are surfactants found in laundry detergents, stain removers, and all-purpose cleaners. APEs are commonly detected as contaminants in rivers and streams, and have been found in household dust.

- Phthalates are carriers for fragrance in glass cleaners, deodorizers, laundry detergents and fabric softeners, linked to adverse effects on males and increased allergic symptoms and asthma in children.