

Cleaning tips made simple

When your house gleams, you do, too. Learn how to get that deep-down spring-cleaning clean, without losing your mind.

By Natalie Ermann Russell

There's something about the spring that makes us yearn for all things clean and fresh and bright. The temperature changes, and the days become longer, rejuvenating us -- and proving just what a difference a season makes. With that in mind, we talked with the cleanest, most sparkling TV, radio and print personalities to get the dirt on the latest products and tricks sure to make this year's spring cleaning a breeze. Here are some of their surprising solutions to our dirty little problems.

Plastic shower curtain liner mildew

SOLUTION: "Toss it into the washing machine with laundry soap and two or three bath towels (for friction), hang it up (no dryer), and it will look new again," says Laura Dellutri, aka the Healthy Housekeeper, who wrote "Speed Cleaning 101."

WAIT, THERE'S MORE! "What's the point in having a shower curtain and a liner?" asks Danny Seo, host of "Simply Green" on Lime (Sirius Radio channel 114, Wednesdays, 2 p.m. ET) and author of "Conscious Style Home: Eco-Friendly Living for the 21st Century." "Take a cue from hotels and use only a 100% nylon curtain, which is watertight and needs no liner."

Built-up soap scum

SOLUTION: Seo swears by melamine sponges (Mr. Clean Magic Eraser is the most common, but any generic brand will do). "With just water, it can pick up all the soap scum, grime and dirt that normally you'd have to scrub away," he says.

WAIT, THERE'S MORE! "The new Scrubbing Bubbles Automatic Shower Cleaner does the work for you," Dellutri says. "Just push the button after each shower, and the dispenser shoots the cleaner in a 360-degree circle, preventing soap scum, mildew buildup and lime scale."

Dust

SOLUTION: "When you dust the old-fashioned way, it comes back," says Heloise, whose syndicated "Hints from Heloise" column runs in more than 500 newspapers. "Vacuum the dust away first, and use the new microfiber cloths, even on a fabric surface. And to minimize dust, do your best to keep it out: Change the disposable filter in the A/C more often (or, if your filter is reusable, vacuum it), have walk-off mats in front of every door, and take off your shoes when you come in." As for the furniture, "Queen of Clean" Linda Cobb, of DIY's "Home Made Easy" (a five-part workshop that premieres March 20-24 at 3:30 p.m. ET) and author of Talking "Dirty with the Queen of Clean," says the world's best polish is a mixture of 1 cup olive oil and 1/2 cup white vinegar (shake well before using).

WAIT, THERE'S MORE! "Use a bristled paintbrush to dust computer keyboards and in the crevices of remote controls," says Kristin van Ogtrop, managing editor of "Real Simple" magazine and contributor to PBS' "Real Simple" (check local listings for airtimes). "Kids even like to do it."

Dull wood floors

SOLUTION: "Clean your natural wood floors with black tea," Cobb says. "They love the tannins in tea. It's good for the wood, and it leaves a wonderful shine." Steep the tea, and let it come to room temperature. Dip a mop or soft cloth into the mixture, and ring it out well before using so it won't drip.

WAIT, THERE'S MORE! Seo relies on used dryer sheets to pick up stray hairs and dust. "I call it the poor man's Swiffer, a true recycling idea," he says. "The key is to not use a fresh sheet, which can leave a mark."



Dirty windows

SOLUTION: "Paper towels leave lint, so use balled-up newspaper or even coffee filters instead," van Ogtrop says. "And try to clean windows on a cloudy day to reduce streaking." Dellutri opts for a professional window squeegee from ungerglobal.com. Apply pressure in an overlapping horizontal path, drying the blade after each pass with a dry cloth.

WAIT, THERE'S MORE! When you clean your windows, go in opposite directions on the inside and the outside, says Kim Woodburn, co-host of Lifetime's "How Clean Is Your House?" and co-author of a book with the same name. "That way, if there are any streaks at the end, you'll know which side they're on," she says. "And you won't have to run back and forth like a hooligan."

Grimy grill

SOLUTION: "Spread out a heavy-duty plastic garbage bag, put [the grill's grate] inside with 1/4 cup of ammonia, and tie it shut," Heloise says. Let it sit overnight. By the next day, the fumes will have softened most of the caked-on debris, which then can be removed by rubbing it with a ball of aluminum foil. Or, you can spray it down with a home power washer, or even one at a car wash.

WAIT, THERE'S MORE! "The No. 1 thing is to clean a grill while it's warm," Cobb says. So before your first cookout, crank it up to high (or let the charcoal blaze) for about 15 minutes. Let it cool a bit, then rub the grate with a ball of foil (not the grill brush, which likely harbors bits of spoiled food). And clean the outside of the grill with a "waterless hand cleaner" from the hardware store. "The grill will shine like new," Cobb says, "and it leaves a layer of oil that helps protect the grill from the elements."

Dirty fridge

SOLUTION: "People don't always realize there are a lot of things in your fridge you can clean in the dishwasher," van Ogtrop says. "The drawers, egg holders, racks. Put as much stuff in as will fit."

WAIT, THERE'S MORE! "We often forget about cleaning the coils," van Ogtrop says. "When they're clean, they operate so much more efficiently." First remove the grill plate (consult the manual, as methods can vary), and clean the refrigerator coils with a bottle brush or with the brush attachment on your vacuum.

A musty closet smell

SOLUTION: Put some charcoal briquettes (the kind that don't contain lighter fluid) into large tea strainer balls, and hang them in the closet, Seo says. "The charcoal will absorb funky smells. It's a natural deodorizer."

WAIT, THERE'S MORE! "It's all about trying to limit the amount of moisture, which you can do with chalk," Seo says. "Run a rubber band around a bunch of chalk, then tie it to the rod with ribbon." And to keep your winter shoes smelling fresh, stuff them with wads of newspaper. "It will absorb excess moisture, preventing bacteria growth," Seo says.

The house has a been-closed-up-all-winter odor

SOLUTION: "If you fancy having a nice smell around the house, make your own air freshener," Woodburn says. "Say you love a particular perfume or your husband's aftershave. Well, spray a bit of it on a cool, 'off' light bulb. Then when you turn the light on, you'll get that lovely fragrance."

WAIT, THERE'S MORE! Make your own spray air freshener with essential oils. "I'm partial to rose," Woodburn says. "Fill a spray bottle with warm water and 20 drops of essential oil. Shake it, and spray around the house. It lingers for weeks."

That mothball smell

SOLUTION: "I'm not a believer in mothballs," Cobb says. Instead, she recommends using dried citrus peels (from oranges, limes, etc.). Heat the oven to 300 degrees, then turn it off and let the peels sit inside overnight on a cookie sheet. You can put them into a sachet, sprinkle loose peels around your clothing or drop them into coat pockets.

WAIT, THERE'S MORE! Cobb advises against storing clothes in their dry-cleaning bags, because they can yellow. Instead, she says, let the air circulate by covering hanging clothes with an old bedsheet. Or slip a king-sized pillowcase (with a small hole cut in the top) over the hanger. To keep folded out-of-season clothes from developing pesky creases, Heloise recommends wrapping each item separately in acid-free

tissue paper.

Dirty cabinets and drawers, inside and out

SOLUTION: Cobb recommends using Holy Cow all-purpose cleaner (or a microfiber cloth), because it's safe for food surfaces. And Avon's Skin So Soft bath oil is great on stained-wood cupboards and drawers, as well as hardware. "Rub it on with an old washcloth or other soft cloth, and then buff with another soft cloth," Cobb says. "It's very simple, and it smells great."

WAIT, THERE'S MORE! Cobb warns against using adhesive shelf paper to line drawers and cabinets. Instead, purchase removable drawer liners at a home store so you can remove them easily (unlike the sticky paper), shake them out and wash them.

Mildew on canvas awnings and outdoor furniture

SOLUTION: "These are best cleaned using a pressure washer," says Jeff Campbell, author of "Speed Cleaning" and founder of the Clean Team. "Not only does it clean outdoor furniture, awnings and the like - generally without any soap -- but it also makes your decks and cement walkways look like new again."

WAIT, THERE'S MORE! If the power washer doesn't get everything out, take a bar of Fels-Naptha, which is an old-fashioned heavy-duty laundry bar soap and poison-ivy home remedy, and scrub it onto the awning with a scrub brush, Cobb says. "It removes stains, bird droppings -- everything."

The washer and dryer need a washing and drying

SOLUTION: "Every once in a while," Heloise says, "take the dryer filter out, and clean it with soap and water. Fabric softener can cause buildup on the filter, which prevents it from doing its job." Then use your vacuum upholstery attachment to suck out the lint from inside the filter slot.

To remove soap scum and hard-water stains from the washer, Dellutri says, let the machine run through an entire wash cycle with half a gallon of white vinegar.

WAIT, THERE'S MORE! Cobb likes to clean her filter with a used dryer sheet; it does a better job than bare fingers.

MAKE IT A RITUAL ...

Spring is a great time to do those once-a-year chores that otherwise can fall by the wayside. Sure, we all know to change the batteries in smoke and carbon monoxide detectors and to put fresh filters in the A/C unit, but that's not all:

Seo reminds us to **take old rechargeable batteries** (from cellphones, cordless phones, cordless drills, etc.) to one of 30,000 collection sites at stores such as RadioShack and Target (for more information, visit call2recycle.org or call 800-822-8837).

Heloise reminds us to **clean the top** of our ceiling fan's blades with a microfiber cloth to avoid flying dust bunnies the first time you turn it on.

Heloise also says to **vacuum the dust** from the vents on your computer, TV and other electronics with the upholstery attachment. "In my office -- this is Heloise's office, for heaven's sake -- there was a half-inch of dust on the back of the printer that looked like a carpet."

Recycle rechargeable batteries at stores like Target and RadioShack. For more info, go to call2recycle.org or call 800-822-8837.