

Making your own household cleaners

I (Karen Ray) have been making my own household cleaners for over ten years. Most of my recipes are from the book, Clean House, Clean Planet by Karen Logan. It is available at the library and on Amazon. You can also borrow my copy. In addition to containing numerous recipes for home cleaners, the book describes the chemical components of common commercial cleaners, and the problems with them. By making your own cleaners, you can eliminate toxicity, eliminate fragrances (or choose ones you like), and save money.

Below, I've listed some of my favorite recipes, for the cleaners I use on a weekly basis. For the two cleaners I use most frequently, Alice's Wonder Spray and Go Spot Go, I mix up a gallon at a time and transfer the cleaner to a spray bottle as needed. For ease, I write the recipe on the bottles. Below are some of the ingredients listed in the recipes, and where to find them locally.

Liquid castile soap: Dr. Bronner's castile soap is available at many grocery stores and at the Olympia Food Co-op. Because I use it for many purposes, I buy gallon bottles at the Co-op. Smaller bottles are also available. You can buy fragrance free soap or choose your favorite fragrance.

Baking soda: large boxes of baking soda are readily available. Generic brands may be more prone to clumping than Arm & Hammer.

White Vinegar: Some white vinegars are made from petroleum-derived alcohols! Choose Heinz, made from grains, for the best finished product. Buy it in gallon jugs.

Essential oils: These are for fragrance, and are optional. If you use a soap with fragrance in a recipe, you don't need the essential oil. You can find small bottles of essential oil at the Co-ops and also at Radiance. If you buy from Radiance you can refill your bottles. Only a few drops of essential oil are needed per recipe; a little goes a long way.

Borax: available in grocery stores in the laundry detergent section. The brand I see is called "Twenty Mule Team Borax" and comes in a white and green box.

Glycerin: this used to be available in small bottles at Ralphs and Bayview, but not in recent years. It is available at Radiance, but not always in small bottles. I bought a gallon bottle there recently, and would be happy to give some to anyone wanting to use it for one of these recipes. You may be able to find glycerin in small bottles at local pharmacies.

Liquid Dishwashing Detergent: Commonly referred to as dish soap, it is actually a detergent. For these recipes, use a clear or translucent dish detergent. I buy gallon jugs of phosphate-free, biodegradable dishwashing liquid from the Co-op.

Alice's Wonder Spray

All-purpose cleaner

Adapted from Clean House, Clean Planet by Karen Logan

Ingredients: liquid soap or detergent, white distilled vinegar, borax, purified water, and an essential oil for fragrance (I use Dr. Bronner's castile soap with tea tree oil, and don't add additional essential oil).

How to make: (quantities in parentheses are for making the same solution in bulk, in a 1 gallon container.) Mix 2 tbsp. (1 cup) of vinegar with 1 tsp. (8 tsp.) borax. Fill the rest of a 16 oz. (1 gallon) bottle almost to the top with very hot water. (Karen Logan recommends using purified or distilled water, since minerals in tap water can inhibit cleaning. I use tap water and find the finished product very effective.) Add ¼ cup (2 cups) Dr. Bronner's castile soap with tea tree oil last.

It is important to dissolve the borax in hot water so that it doesn't clog the spray nozzle. And don't mix the soap and vinegar directly together, because the soap will clump up. Please follow the order of the recipe by mixing the vinegar, borax, and water first and adding the soap last.

How to use: Spray and wipe. Use Alice's Wonder Spray as you would any other all-purpose household cleaner. It is not as chemically powerful as commercial cleaners, but if you give it a little more time, it works just as well, and has very rarely failed me. To help remove or prevent mold and mildew, use 1 tbsp. of borax instead of 1 tsp.—and hotter water to make sure it dissolves. Caution: Borax is an eye irritant and can be harmful if swallowed. Keep this product out of the reach of children. Do not use if you have open cuts on your hands and skin. Note: Although technically not disinfectants, borax and tea tree oil are reputed to have antifungal and antiseptic qualities. Alice's Wonder Spray lasts indefinitely.

Dust to Dust Furniture Polish

from Clean House, Clean Planet by Karen Logan

Ingredients: Olive oil, white distilled vinegar, pure essential lemon oil, water

How to make: Put 2 tsp. olive oil in a 16 ounce spray bottle. Add 20 drops or more of pure essential lemon oil. Add ¼ cup of white distilled vinegar. Fill the rest of the bottle with water (purified is best). Shake well.

How to use: spray on a rag or directly on wood furniture and wipe it dry immediately. Dust to Dust also works well on leather couches.

Go Spot Go

Stain and spot remover for clothing and carpets

Adapted from Clean House, Clean Planet by Karen Logan

Ingredients: liquid dishwashing detergent (not soap), glycerin, water

(quantities in parentheses are for making the same solution in bulk, in a 1 gallon container.)

How to make: mix ¼ cup (1-1/4 cup) liquid detergent with ¼ cup (1-1/4 cup) glycerin and 1-1/2 cups (7-1/2 cups) of water. Pour into a spray or squirt bottle. Shake gently before using.

How to use: Use this spot remover on clothing stains, as you would use "Shout." I have found it works just as well. A few general tips (these apply to any stain remover): spray the stain as soon as possible, and let it sit until laundry time. Don't spray too much! Glycerin is slippery and can be hard to wash out. If a stain doesn't completely disappear after washing, don't put the garment in the dryer—this will set the stain. Spray the stain again and rewash. I have found that oil stains may take several washings to completely disappear.

Earth Paste

Tub, Toilet and Tile Cleaner

from Clean House, Clean Planet by Karen Logan

Ingredients: baking soda, liquid soap (Dr. Bronner's almond scent is nice), white distilled vinegar, water

How to make: mix 1-2/3 cup baking soda with ½ cup liquid soap in a bowl. Add 2 tbsp. water. Mix with a fork until smooth. Stir in 2 tbsp. vinegar last. The mixture will foam nicely. Use a spatula to scoop the scrub into a glass jar (such as a peanut butter or canning jar). Add warm water if the paste dries out over time, or break it up into a powder and sprinkle on to use.

How to use: scoop the past out of the jar with a damp sponge or cloth and start cleaning. Rinse well.

Momma's Earth Mop

Floor cleaner

from Clean House, Clean Planet by Karen Logan

Ingredients: white distilled vinegar, water, essential oil (for fragrance)

How to make: mix equal parts white distilled vinegar and water. Add several drops of essential oil for fragrance.

How to use: This recipe is very flexible and can be used various ways. You can mix this in a spray bottle to spray directly on floors. Wipe dry with a clean rag or mop. For large areas, I fill a bucket with a gallon or so of hot water, add about ½ gallon of vinegar and several drops of fragrance (I like tea tree oil or grapefruit). I wipe on the floor with a terrycloth rag, and then go over each section with rag that has plain water on it. This is my regular floor cleaner. If my floors have grease on them, I add a drop or two of dishwashing liquid to the bucket. The basic scented vinegar spray is a good all-purpose mild cleaner that you can use throughout the house. It works as a window cleaner also, as long as you wipe the window/mirror completely dry.