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Easy-To-Make Cleansers Stand Up To Bathroom, Laundry Tests

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Updated:

Set a date, call your girlfriends, and buy the baking soda. You're throwing a green cleaning party, where women can gab, bond, nosh and make their own laundry detergent.

An environmental group in Montana, Women's Voices for the Earth, is sponsoring the parties nationwide.

It sends out kits, recipe cards and instructions for the hostess. She buys baking soda, vinegar, borax and vegetable soap for guests to whip into green cleaners for their homes. Cleaning like our grandmothers may have is cheaper says Women's Voices, www.womenandenvironment.org.

OK, but how well does it clean? I bought the ingredients, found a grimy bathroom, and worried about what the detergent might do to my clothes.

Creamy soft scrub: 2 cups baking soda,

1/2 cup liquid castile soap, 4 teaspoons vegetable glycerin, 5 or more drops essential oil

I bought a bottle of Dr. Bonner's castile soap (\$5.89) and lemon essential oil (\$5.99) at a health food store. Vegetable glycerin can be purchased there, too, but I skipped it. It's a natural preservative for extended shelf life.

It took a lot of stirring to moisten the baking soda. Eventually it was lumpy, but never "creamy soft." So what - it was a powerhouse, with minimal elbow grease, in cleaning the laminate countertop and sink.

All-purpose cleaner: 2 cups white distilled vinegar, 2 cups water, 20 to 30 or more drops of essential oil (optional)

This is just diluted vinegar (\$2.59). The lemon essential oil smelled nice, but even without it, I wouldn't be concerned about odor. When vinegar dries, the smell disappears.

I sprayed the outer toilet, the fiberglass shower door and stall. Grime on the toilet almost slid off.

The shower door required three applications; the soap scum was coming off but needed more scrubbing. That's to be expected - this shower is grimy enough to need heavy-duty effort.

Toilet bowl cleaner: Option 1: Sprinkle toilet bowl with baking soda (65 cents), drizzle with vinegar, let sit for at least 30 minutes and scrub with toilet brush. Option 2: Add

1/4 cup borax (\$2.97) to bowl and let sit for at least 30 minutes. Swish with brush, then scrub.

I chose the second option, and it was easy. But I wasn't sure the bowl was clean, even though it looked clean. I'm used to that smell of cleaner.

Laundry detergent: 1 cup soap flakes,

1/2 cup washing soda,

1/2 cup borax

This recipe seemed intimidating. Would it harm today's fabric blends? I didn't know where to get soap flakes and had never heard of washing soda.

Online research helped. Soap flakes aren't sold in markets anymore, but you can make your own with a cheese grater. It took only a minute to grate a cup from a bar of Dr. Bonner's castile soap.

There is an Arm & Hammer washing soda (\$2.19), which is different from baking soda. It's sold in some laundry aisles. By calling Arm & Hammer's customer service number, I learned Publix has it.

I bought rubber gloves to mix this stuff. Washing soda can irritate skin.

Only a tablespoon of detergent is needed per load. I put in a load of T-shirts, knit tops and underwear. A half-cup of vinegar went into the rinse cycle as a fabric softener.

Out of the washer, the damp clothes were delightfully clean and fresh. Great! Out of the dryer, they had no smell, weren't as soft as I'm used to and had a touch of static. I may just need a clothesline.

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