

Chapter 1

Cleaning House in a Brave Green World

In This Chapter

- ▶ Recognizing the connection between clean and green
 - ▶ Embracing a new way of cleaning
 - ▶ Cleaning green throughout the house
 - ▶ Adapting green cleaning to your unique world
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paper or plastic? Dishwasher or sink? Dry-clean or hand wash? Tap water or bottled water? Carpeting or linoleum? As citizens of the world attempt to navigate the complexities of environmental responsibility, more questions than answers surface, especially regarding sustainable practices in the home. The choices can be tricky. Sometimes the solution that seems the most green isn't.

Take grapes, for example: Organic grapes seem the greener choice, at first blush. True, organic growing methods don't rely on chemicals or processes that require fossil fuels, which cause the greenhouse gas emissions that add to climate change. But when your grapes are shipped from Chile, the petroleum savings are gobbled up by the energy cost to get them to your store. The grapes grown locally are, while not certified organic, the more sustainable choice.

Contemplating the green angle definitely adds layers of complexity to the simplest of tasks: shopping, eating, cleaning the house. I intend to peel away some of those layers, to help simplify your already complicated life, at least in terms of housecleaning. By exploring the world of cleaning in an *ecological* manner, I show you that you *can* have a clean house, and green it, too.

Waking Up to a New Awareness

No doubt about it: What happens in Peoria affects Patagonia. And Paris. And Punxsutawney. The water wasted in Scranton hurts villages in the Sahara. The traffic congestion in Atlanta warms the ice caps in the Arctic. If only it were true that what happens in Vegas stays in Vegas. But people there and throughout the world are waking up to the fact that their actions can affect the climate, damage the planet, and use up stuff you may really want to keep.

How you clean has an impact on the environment, too. Greening the way you mop your floors may seem like a drop in the bucket, but each small change accumulates into a larger stream. Maybe you can't save the Antarctic penguins this morning, but you can hold off running the dishwasher until you have a full load. Action by action, you can make positive changes.

Your housekeeping practices intersect with big-picture ecological issues at many junctures. Look for these connections:

✔ **Plugging petroleum consumption:** Plug in, turn on, flip the switch, press the button. Your home's appliances, temperature control, operating systems, and even water delivery all run on energy generated by fossil fuel. Petroleum is also a critical component of most plastic containers, which hold everything from ketchup to tile cleaner.

Modifying your cleaning routine — decreasing the number of laundry loads, updating old, inefficient appliances, and even turning down the temperature on your water heater — can play a big role in reducing your household energy consumption. In Chapter 2, I cover all the places you may find “oil” in your cleaning closet. And throughout the book, I offer alternatives to energy-intense cleaning methods, whenever possible.

✔ **Clearing the air:** Not only do many home furnishings and materials include petroleum, some forms can cause harm to the environment and to you and the inhabitants of your home, contaminating water systems and emitting unhealthy chemicals. Blame it on paint, particleboard in cabinets, vinyl flooring, and carpeting and upholstery, but air quality in the typical American home can be worse than the outdoor air. Commercial household cleaning products are also culpable. Chapter 3 spells out the worst offenders.

✔ **Blocking the drain on water:** You thought oil was in short supply. Water is being depleted at an alarming rate, through drought, pollution, and commoditization by big business interests. Changing your cleaning habits helps reduce your contribution to water shortage: Using energy-efficient washing

machines, taking shorter showers, and using your disposal less all help. This book is packed with tips for conserving water: Chapter 2 addresses the energy cost that water carries.

- ✓ **Taking out the trash:** Landfills climb ever higher, as the world population continues to consume. Cleaning practices can contribute to the problem. Choosing reusable dust cloths over paper towels or throwaways; being mindful of the packaging that accompanies new cleaning products; and even purchasing cleaning appliances designed to last help reduce your contribution to the waste stream.

Cleaning green is good for the planet, but it's also good for you. As you begin making changes to your housekeeping practices, you're certain to discover the following benefits:

- ✓ **Better health:** Removing harmful chemicals (found in many conventional cleaners) is bound to improve air quality in your home, thereby having a positive effect on the health of its inhabitants.
- ✓ **More savings:** Energy-efficient appliances, although sometimes more costly upfront, mean you spend less on energy and reduce water usage. You gain even more savings when you simplify your cleaning arsenal with homemade recipes concocted from common ingredients that cost pennies compared to commercial cleaners.
- ✓ **Deeper commitment:** Cleaning green can be one of those "gateway" experiences that lead to a heightened awareness of other ecoconscious practices. Every green step you take elevates you to the next level, where you discover yet other ways to make sustainable changes to your life and to the world.

Gearing Up for a New Clean

Making changes, even small ones, takes some preparatory work. And figuring out your plan of attack is an important step when launching your new clean-green assault. Here's what you need to do:

- ✓ **Employ better tactics.** One of the cornerstones of sustainability is to avoid the *need* to consume resources and expend energy: If you can take a bus to work, for example, why buy a car? With cleaning green, a great place to start is to consider the stuff you have to clean. A white carpet takes more effort to maintain than a tile floor. Dry cleaning is more costly (from environmental damage to personal budget) than washing at home. You get the idea.

This advice parlays to housekeeping in a bunch of ways: from implementing routines to prevent your home from getting dirty (taking off your shoes at the front door), to recognizing that you don't need separate cleaning formulas for each surface and room in your home. Chapter 4 presents pointers that help you avoid housework — or at least reduce its intensity and frequency — and outlines routine maintenance issues, such as servicing your furnace regularly, that keep your home systems running efficiently.

- ✓ **Stock better tools.** Choosing tools and cleaning aids that do the least amount of damage to the environment is another important component of sustainable cleaning. Mop systems, for example, are a great convenience for modern housekeepers. But their throwaway mop heads are a green strike against them. Single-use wipes, likewise, are wasteful when an old towel or diaper can do the job again and again.

Simplifying your tools — gathering a few that serve many purposes rather than dozens that all perform a single specialized task — and investing in durable items that last are steps for greening your utility closet. Find lots more in Chapter 5.

- ✓ **Switch to better ingredients.** Cleaning formulas made of petroleum-based chemicals may rid your home of undesirable elements (dirt, mold, grime, germs), but may introduce unhealthy chemicals into your home. If the same cleaner that kills the germs that were making you sick now emits a fume that makes you sick, are you really ahead?

An easy and inexpensive way to reduce the fossil fuel in your cleaners is to make your own with common household items such as vinegar and salt. Some of the recipes found in Chapter 6 take just seconds to make and can clean a host of household surfaces.

Going Green Room by Room

Your home is packed with a multitude of cleaning and greening challenges. And Part III walks you through them, room by room, even addressing your outdoor “living room.”

Although I cover each room separately in a chapter all its own, you find recurring situations and challenges throughout your house. All rooms have floors, for example. Some rooms share similar surfaces — tile, porcelain, stone. And many rooms are furnished with wood. So while I thoroughly cover the cleaning highlights for each space, I may direct you to another chapter for further detail.

For example, flooring types are covered in some detail in the chapters about the kitchen (Chapter 7) and the living room (Chapter 11), so in Chapter 10 (bedrooms), I sweep through floor cleaning as it pertains to the bedroom, but direct you to the other chapters for more detail about flooring materials.

The variety in home design is virtually infinite. Region frequently dictates whether a home includes a basement, an attached garage, or a separate dining room. Family circumstances may determine the choice of a home office or nursery. And personal interests might mean that an extra bedroom becomes a library, a fitness room, or a meditation area.

I don't include chapters for every possible dedicated space a home may shelter. But you can be sure that the particular needs of such rooms are addressed in one of the chapters. For example, you can read Chapter 11, which features the living room, if you want pointers on green cleaning a den, a basement furnished as a family room, or a library.

Taking Green to the Next Level

Green doesn't stop when you put the broom away. Sometimes it's helpful to understand how other pieces of the green-home puzzle play into your housekeeping efforts. How you shop, eat, travel, work, and socialize — at some level, they all make their way into your home.

Chapter 14 suggests ecoconscious steps you can take beyond cleaning, from how you use (or *don't* use) your car to insulating and weatherizing your home to buying local food. But helpful information and valuable tips are packed into every chapter. For example, in Chapter 7, you find out about composting your kitchen scraps, making good use of what would have been thrown out and feeding your garden. In Chapter 10, I talk about buying organic sheets and tell you about the greenest pillows available.



Cleaning is a form of creative self-expression. You and I probably approach cleaning in a totally different style. I fly through my house; my cleaning routine is so familiar that I can whip any room into shape in 15 minutes or less. (I share the secrets to speed-cleaning in Chapters 7 through 11.) You, on the other hand, may find cleaning a kind of therapy, purging closets and sorting through drawers in place of having a meltdown.

Whether you're a utilitarian, "get 'er done" type or you have a more Zen attitude (creating an environment that nurtures your spirit), the approaches I present in this book are all adaptable for your unique cleaning personality.

