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UP CLOSE: CLEANERS & DISINFECTANTS

Green: The Only Option?

Green cleaners have their place in a cleaning program, but end users must be aware of their limitations

By Cynthia Kincaid
Email the SM editors

With the advent of the federally mandated use of green products in government buildings and schools, the green cleaning movement has seen a surge of interest in the use of environmentally friendly products and applications. But the deployment of green cleaning products, and the debate swirling around their use, has been anything but simple.

"Green is not a product or a certification. It's a concept, a thought process, an action," says Stephen Ashkin, president of [The Ashkin Group LLC](#), Bloomington, Ind. "It's not just about a product, it's looking at the process, and products are just a part of that process."

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The popularity of green cleaning products seems to be growing by the day, and customer demand is propelling the green direction, says Michael Liscio, vice president of sales for [Clark Products](#), Carteret, N.J.

"We are knee deep in the green stuff," he says. "My three biggest [building service] contractors, who all do over \$1 million a year, have taken a stance to live in green, not just in chemicals, but in equipment."

All this green fervor — while indeed reducing health and environmental impacts — should be appropriately scrutinized, cautions Ashkin.

"We should try to green everything, but that doesn't mean there's always opportunities to do it," he says.

This is where the controversy of using green products to clean everything in a facility can intensify, particularly where deep cleaning is concerned. In some instances green products aren't enough.

Everything Can't Be Greened

Not everyone is embracing green cleaning. Some, like Dr. Michael Berry, Ph.D., retired [United States Environmental Protection Agency \(EPA\)](#) scientist and currently a research

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professor at the [University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill](#), have problems with how green cleaning products are being marketed and used.

"Cleaning is the process of taking unwanted, sometimes harmful matter, and putting it in its proper place, so that it doesn't have an adverse affect on human beings," he says. "Cleaning is the process to achieve that condition, and this whole thing with green cleaning has completely missed the purpose of cleaning."

Berry underscores what he sees as political activists and business interests trying to exploit the good intentions of average citizens towards the environment by offering so-called "green products" that have little efficacy or science behind their advertised results.

"Everything is green," he says. "If you take a look at these green products, and you ask for efficacy information, in terms of effectiveness in cleaning, you're going to find out you have an absence of data."

As an example, Berry points to the chlorinated compounds in cleaning products that have been responsible for killing pathogens in schools and hospitals.

"What have we done? We've taken them out of the products," he says. "So what does the product do? Virtually nothing. Take a look at infection rates in hospitals today, which are in direct proportion with the movement away from effective cleaning products."

In fact, hospital infections kill more Americans each year than AIDS, breast cancer and auto accidents combined, according to [hospitalinfection.org](#).

Clean vs. Green

Green cleaners do have their place in a cleaning program, but end users must be aware of their limitations.

For instance, Liscio says, hard water is a problem in New Jersey, and mineral deposits accumulate in the urinals, toilet bowls and water fixtures. Green products don't seem to be effective enough.

"There are specialty products to remove them that are not environmentally friendly," says Liscio. "The buildings that I have on green cleaning right now are periodically, maybe once a quarter, cleaned with a harsher product to satisfy that cleaning task."

Liscio admits that the green products he sells satisfy about 90 percent of his clients' needs. However, situations that involve oil and grease, particularly automotive grease, can be challenging for many green products, and a harsher non-green degreaser may need to be used.

"Green products don't cut through those soils as well as some of the chemically-based products," Liscio explains. "There are some citrus cleaners out there that pack a punch, but they are not as environmentally friendly because they are of a solvent nature."

Teresa Farmer, green program specialist for Knoxville, Tenn.-based [Kelsan, Inc.](#), finds that customers sometimes use a green cleaner, and then follow that up with a harsher product to get the job done.

"We have a customer that uses a hospital-grade disinfectant throughout the facility, but for their everyday cleaning, they are using green cleaners," she says. "They'll use the green bathroom and glass cleaners, and they'll mop with a disinfectant."

Disinfecting is one area where end users will have to stray away from green cleaning.

The EPA's partnership program, [Design for the Environment \(DfE\)](#), does not register disinfectants because they are classified as pesticides. And because these products kill microorganisms such as Methicillin-resistant Staphylococcus aureus (MRSA) and avian influenza, manufacturers are prohibited from

using the words "safe" or "non-toxic" on the label. The EPA also prohibits the certification of these

disinfectants by third party organizations and is currently working on better registration for disinfectants.

"We would never tell customers not to disinfect," Farmer says. "We have a large offering of green products, so we try to make it work within their facility and give them the option."

When it comes to providing customers with a disinfectant that complements a green cleaning program, Farmer says she introduces those to customers that have claims backed by the EPA.

"We tell our customers that they should always use a disinfectant that is EPA registered because when EPA registers a disinfectant, it addresses the kill claims," she says. "We also recommend that customers look at the kill claims, and if the product kills bloodborne pathogens and MRSA, then that's a pretty effective disinfectant."

Distributors can also recommend disinfectants that would complement a green cleaning program. These are products that are butyl-free, pH neutral, hydrogen-peroxide based and available in concentrate form. Many of these products have kill claims for MRSA, avian influenza and other microorganisms, but are considered safer for the environment.

Education And Training

The role of education and training end users on when to use green cleaners or harsher products cannot be overemphasized.

"Education is the feature that truly differentiates one distributor from another," says Ashkin.

And most distributors agree that effective training involves educating end-users in utilizing the best chemical for a specific area and purpose. In other words, hospital-grade disinfectants that are used for patient rooms or restrooms shouldn't necessarily be used to clean the lobby or waiting rooms.

"We think proper procedures and training is more important than what cleaner you're using," says Farmer. "You want to use a great product, but if you don't know how to use it, it doesn't matter whether it's green or not."

Cynthia Kincaid is a freelance writer based in Portland, Ore.

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