



Environment

Green and Clean

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Candita Clayton of East Providence has written a book about cleaning green — clearing your house of a variety of toxins by using green cleaning products.

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Candita Clayton likes things clean. That's why she's a professional organizer, helping people clear clutter from their lives.

But about two years ago, she walked into the home of a pregnant client and was immediately overwhelmed by the smell of cleaning chemicals. Her instinct told her that the vapors weren't good for the baby or the mom — or for anyone else, for that matter.

So she began researching healthier alternatives for a clean, healthy home — whether using cleaning supplies made with hydrogen peroxide instead of bleach or ammonia, or replacing scented candles and aerosol air fresheners with candles made of soy, or using fragrance sticks and essential oils.

Clayton is not a doctor or environmental scientist. She simply collected research findings from a host of different resources — including government agencies, such as the Environmental Protection Agency and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, and non-profit groups, such as the American

Cancer Society and Greenpeace, an international environmentalist activist group.

She's been sharing her research and tips through newspapers and magazines and on the HGTV.com Web site. And she recently compiled much of this information into a new book, *Clean Your Home Healthy: Green Cleaning Made Easy*, which was published earlier this month.

It not only includes specific ideas for a cleaner, healthier lifestyle, but also a variety of resources — including the names of dozens of companies that provide natural and non-toxic products and a list of other books, Web sites and organizations that can help people “go green” in pursuit of healthier environments.

“There are things I know now that I wish I had known when I was pregnant and when my kids were little,” said Clayton, who lives in East Providence with her husband, Tom, and children, Tyler, 7, and Lily, 10.

Clayton said she hopes the book simply raises people's awareness of the chemicals and toxins in their homes, so they can consider healthier alternatives.

After all, she said, “What you don't know can hurt you.”

CLAYTON RAN A PRIVATE fitness and nutrition consulting business for 17 years before she launched her organizing business, *Your Life Organized*, in 2001. Her own life felt so chaotic at the time that she decided it was time to try to regain control. So she spent six months going room by room through her house, and through each of her routines, asking herself what was and wasn't “working” and what she could change to make things better.

“It really was life-changing for me,” said Clayton. “I felt so much calmer, so much more ‘present’ with my kids.”

She then spent a year working for free with family members and friends, helping them organize their homes and their lives, to see what worked and what didn't work for others. She since has worked with hundreds of clients who pay about \$75 an hour, doing everything from organizing closets and kitchens to helping people downsize or upsize from one home to the next.

“I'm a problem solver, really,” Clayton said. “That's what I enjoy doing — solving problems.”

She'd been contributing expert advice on organizing to newspapers and magazines for years, including working with HGTV.com for their on-line series called “Get Organized” — providing tips on organizing everything from photographs to new nurseries.

She especially enjoys working with expectant mothers to help them organize and prepare for the upcoming changes in their lives. That's when she started thinking about cleaning products and other materials in the home, and their effects on the family, house and environment.

Some chemicals, like the ammonia and bleach found in most cleaning products, irritate the respiratory system, she said. “(Most) things that you can smell are not good for you. If it has a chemical smell, it's a warning sign,” she said.

But others are “very silent, mysterious things” — like the formaldehyde-based chemicals used to make a crib mattress flame-retardant or in glues that hold some inexpensive furniture together, she said.

SO SHE BEGAN LOOKING more closely at the ingredients or composition of different things she was buying — and recommending for her clients to use, as well. She also asked people to consider the effects of various products on the environment.

Many synthetic products end up in landfills and “take thousands of years to break down,” Clayton noted. So, for example, she recommends people use refillable water bottles instead of disposable ones. Others, like harsh chemical cleaners, pollute the atmosphere.

But other things aren't nearly as evident, Clayton said. For example, she said, many people have no idea as to some of the things they're being exposed to — such as formaldehyde-based chemicals in “wrinkle-free” shirts and sheets, or toxic fumes given off by adhesives used for vinyl floors and synthetic carpets. “I'm not saying to people, ‘Oh my God, you've got to go through your whole house (and throw everything away),’ ” Clayton said. Instead, she said, “I'm saying before you run out and buy (something) you might want to consider how it's made.”

Sarah Kite, recycling manager for the Rhode Island Resource Recovery Corp., said she's seen a steady increase in the amount of household materials that have been declared “hazardous waste” in recent years, “They run the gamut, from general household cleaners like bleach and ammonia, things like window cleaners and oven cleaners you just have under your sink and under your cabinets, that over time you certainly want to limit your exposure to.”

Some things are obviously dangerous, Kite said. “If you look on the label and see any kind of skull and crossbones, there's your first indication that you need to take extreme caution with it.” Also look for other buzz words, such as poisonous, flammable, caustic or toxic, or instructions that call for special care. For example, she said, some say to use the products only “in well ventilated areas,” which means they're clearly not healthy for people to breathe.

Many of these substances have been used for years, without people realizing they're dangerous, Kite said. People are now researching whether there are any links with chemicals such as these and the increases in kids with “sensitivity issues” and asthma and autism, she said. “We don't know if they're connected, but because we've had these harsh chemicals in our houses for so long, you think, gee, maybe we should be rethinking this and coming up with a more natural way of achieving the same goal — which is to have a clean and healthy home.”

KITE ALSO RECOMMENDED that people turn to old-fashioned methods and materials that have less impact overall — things like hydrogen peroxide, baking soda, lemon juice and even salt for scrubbing and cleaning. “These items have worked for generations, and they're not nearly as harmful as these newly developed chemicals,” she said.

They can also save money in the long run, she said. “A lot of us have way more cleaning solutions than we need. If you look at them, a lot of them are specialized. You have to have this one for the windows, this one for the oven, this one for the counters, this one for the toilet. But you don't necessarily have to have a specialized cleaner for each and every surface of your home. If you can have one or two natural cleaners that will tackle 10 jobs each, you're saving money and you're saving your exposure to the harsher chemicals and keeping the air in your home cleaner.”

That doesn't mean people have to throw out every bottle of cleaner in their house, she said. “If you have it in the house and you're using it, feel free to use up the material. . . . But if they're concerned, the next time they're shopping, look at the alternatives” — particularly natural alternatives you can buy or make from scratch.

That's not to say that everything in your house is dangerous, Kite said. "There are all kinds of cautions coming out now and it's going to take awhile to sift through what is fact and what is hype and what we really truly do need to action on and what we need to study," she said.

This is true for a variety of things people have used for years, from household paints and synthetic carpets to the more obvious chemicals that come with warning labels, she said. And people need to look at alternatives, she said, such as using dried flowers from the backyard garden instead of a plug-in air freshener "that's going to spew chemicals into the air."

Steven Hamburg, interim director of the Center for Environmental Studies at Brown University, said these issues are all considerations in the growing movement toward "green" houses.

That mostly involves reducing the amount of volatile organic compounds, or VOCS, which are the chemicals given off by different materials such as chemical cleaners, paints, vinyl materials and other products, especially when they're new. It's a process known as "degassing," which means its releasing chemicals into the air, Hamburg explained. While many things — including trees — give off organic compounds, the goal is to minimize the type and amount of compounds released into the air within your house.

Some people are more sensitive to these emissions than others, he noted. "Some people are hyper sensitive" and react immediately to any sort of chemical emission or smell. Others may be able to tolerate more, but that doesn't mean their bodies aren't affected by what they're breathing in, he said.

These emissions will taper off over time, which is why most people don't have to worry about existing materials in their homes, Hamburg said. But when buying new, he said, it's better to minimize or avoid the emissions, if possible, especially within the confines of a home. One way to do that, he said, is by using natural cleaning products or "low-VOC" paints and other products. "When you make an alteration to your house, you shouldn't be able to smell it," he said.

The same is true of cleaning supplies, he said. Most people don't need heavy-duty, chemical-based cleaners for every day cleaning, such as routine housework and laundry. So it's better to look for natural alternatives that in most cases work just as well, with less impact on people and the environment.

"The real key is to minimize (the volatile organic compounds within a home)", Hamburg said. "You're not going to get zero, and I don't think you need to, but the key is to try to minimize your exposure to these things as much as you can."

THIS DOESN'T MEAN people should be "afraid to be in their own homes," Kite said. "I don't think people have to panic. And I don't think they need to be overly worried (about what's in their homes). It's a matter of becoming aware and being thoughtful and trying to figure out what small changes they can make in their own lifestyles that will make some positive impact down the road."

Clayton agreed. "It's not an all-or-nothing, tree-hugging proposition," she said. It's simply a matter of being aware of what options are out there.

She has been compiling her research, tips and tricks for more than two years, and last summer signed a contract with Morgan James Publishing, which published the book earlier this month. It sells for \$19.95 and is available at Amazon.com and in local bookstores, including Books on the Square in Wayland Square.

Clayton said the green cleaning is a natural extension of her organizing business. After all, she said, “A clean house and an organized house go hand in hand,” she said, adding, “. . . It’s about making life better in general.”

For more information about the book, *Clean Your Home Healthy: Green Cleaning Made Easy*, or for additional information on organizing and “green cleaning,” check out Clayton’s Web site at www.cleanyourhomehealthy.com or her personal blog at www.yourlifeorganized.typepad.com. GREEN CLEANING TIPS

Candita Clayton, a professional organizer who wrote *Clean Your Home Healthy: Green Cleaning Made Easy*, offers the following tips for our readers:

Five cleaning products to get out of your house right now:

- Chlorine bleach: It’s the number one household chemical involved in poisonings, according to the American Association of Poison Control Centers.
- Glass cleaners containing ammonia: The odors linger in the air, irritating the respiratory system and affecting the overall air quality in the home.
- Moth balls: They contain substances such as naphthalene, which is a registered carcinogen (a cancer-causing agent).
- Traditional surface and countertop cleaners: Chemicals that claim to kill 99.9 percent of germs can be absorbed into food when placed on “clean” countertops.

Five alternative cleaning products:

- Use hydrogen peroxide diluted with water to replace chlorine bleach, or use hydrogen peroxide straight for tough mold and mildew. (Make sure to try it on a test area first, as it can discolor fabric and paint like bleach does)
- Replace traditional spray cleaners with white vinegar diluted with water in a spray bottle to clean nearly any surface.
- Use a paste of lemon and baking soda instead of abrasive cleansers.
- Replace traditional oven cleaners with a citrus-based cleaner or degreaser, or use baking soda, hot water and steel wool to clean ovens.
- Use castile soap diluted with water instead of petroleum-based cleaners.

Five ways to help the environment,

inside and outside the home

- Hang clothes that have been dry cleaned outside until the smell is gone.
- Use refillable water bottles instead of throw-aways.

- Use hydrostatic dusting cloths instead of furniture polish.
- Use cloth napkins and plates and utensils that are washed and reused, instead of paper napkins and plates and plastic utensils that are discarded.
- Replace traditional light bulbs with compact fluorescent bulbs for energy efficiency.

Five ways to “think green” when buying or replacing

- Use fabric shower curtains instead of vinyl ones that can give off gas for up to a month, polluting the indoor air. (Alternatively, hang a new vinyl curtain outside until all odor is gone)
- Clothing and sheets labeled “wrinkle-free” or “easy care” can contain formaldehyde, which can rub off on skin. Consider organic cotton clothing and sheets instead.
- Use “low-VOC” paints — paints with low amounts of volatile organic compounds — instead of traditional oil-based or latex paints that emit odors.
- Traditional wax candles can emit known toxins when burned. Use soy candles.
- Replace plastic infant and children’s toys with traditional wooden ones or seek out toys made of alternative materials, such as fabric.

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