

THE NEXT

STEP

Toward a Healthier Future

A BI-MONTHLY NEWSLETTER OF THE SEBASTOPOL TOXICS EDUCATION PROGRAM

Oven Cleaning Without Toxics

A reader asked us a while back, **"How can I clean my oven without using a toxic oven cleaner?"**

She's right to be concerned. **Oven cleaners can indeed be toxic and unpleasant to use.** For instance, one product label warns: "Danger: Avoid contact with eyes and skin. Skin contact will cause burns. Wear [long] rubber gloves. Vapor harmful. Avoid continuous breathing of vapor and spray mist. Harmful or fatal if swallowed. Keep out of reach of children.

This product contacts a chemical known to the state of California to cause cancer." The label also indicates which other materials to protect from the product, including floors. These warnings are especially notable since the spray puts these chemicals into the air where they can easily get on your skin, in your eyes and lungs, and elsewhere.

Luckily, the alternatives are simple, inexpensive, and effective. I first used the approach below when I moved out of an apartment quite a few years ago. The landlord actually mentioned that the oven was the cleanest any tenant had left it.

For moderate grime, put 1–2 tablespoons liquid soap (not detergent) in a spray bottle and fill with warm water. For more serious cases, add 2 teaspoons borax; make sure it's completely dissolved to avoid clogging the squirt mechanism. (More about borax is in TNS II/4 and on its box.)

Spray your formula of choice in your oven.

Leave to soak for a few hours or overnight; this softens the baked-on material. Clean with a supermarket green pad. If you need stronger scrubbing, you can use steel wool and/or a nonchlorine scouring powder like Bon Ami. For really baked-on black spots, use a pumice stick, available at hardware stores. Rinse with water and it will sparkle!

You can keep future cleaning simple

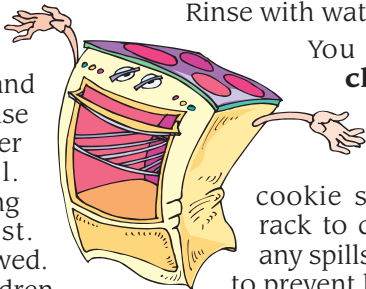
by avoiding spills. Use proper sized containers and put a cookie sheet on your lower rack to catch drips. Clean up any spills after the oven cools, to prevent baking it in.

Our reader used the cleaning method described here, and she reported back: **"Thanks so much for that recommendation. It worked very well.** Some of the older stuff needed more elbow grease with the steel wool, but if you started with a new stove and kept up on it you'd never even have to use steel wool. **It was so great not to smell those [oven cleaner] fumes... I'll never use it again. Thanks for getting me over that chemical dependency!** I also used [the new spray] in my bathtub and toilet. Great! Do you consider it all purpose?"

Yes indeed, you can clean much of your house with just liquid soap and water in a spray bottle. Adding borax gives it a boost. We really don't need a separate product for each situation!

~ Patricia Dines

SOURCE: *Nontoxic, Natural, & Earthwise*, Debra Lynn Dadd, 1990. (Dadd also wrote an updated book in 1997, *Home Safe Home*.)



It's Our Birthday!!

With this issue, we're celebrating *four years* publishing *The Next STEP (TNS)*! The goal of this innovative City project is to nurture a healthier Sebastopol for everyone. **To reduce exposure to toxics, we encourage voluntary reductions** in their use in all areas of our lives — including our homes, schools, businesses, parks, food, and water.

TNS is produced by a small team of local citizens, working on a volunteer basis (which keeps costs very low) because we support this goal! We're grateful to the City Council and staff for acting in the community's best interest with this project.

Please fill out the enclosed survey card to give us your feedback about our efforts. Also let us know how we can best support your toxics reduction in the upcoming year, including any questions, tips, story ideas, or success stories. Your support is what makes this project possible. Thank you!



"The Next STEP is wonderful! Both graphics and text are very well done, and the message, of course, is much needed. Wouldn't it be marvelous to get every city in the U.S. to include it with one of their bills? You have really accomplished something.... Carry on your good work!" *Lynn L.*

...

"When I first moved here and got [TNS] in my water bill I thought, 'The City's letting us know about stuff like this? How cool. I moved to the right place.'" *Elizabeth S.*

...

"I love [TNS]! Thank you so much!" *Lisa R.*

Nearly All of America's Streams & Groundwater Polluted with Chemicals

A nationwide study of streams and groundwater, conducted by the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS), found that **nearly all of America's fresh water is tainted with low concentrations of chemicals.**

Pesticides, for example, were detected in 94% of all water samples and 90% of fish. The report says that concentrations usually fell below the Environmental Protection Agency's (EPA) recommended limits, but that the widespread appearance of pollutants is cause for concern. (Other studies have shown that the EPA's limits underestimate the health and environmental harm from long-term low-level toxic exposure, especially harm from multiple sources.)

The monitoring in this study is the USGS's broadest so far. More than 400 scientists, over ten years, tested thousands of U.S. rivers, aquifers, wells, fish, and sediments. They analyzed 11 million samples for more than 600 chemicals.

One surprise to the study team was **the prevalence of certain chemicals even far from urban locales** — for instance, the gas additive MTBE in rural groundwater, and mercury in fish from pristine areas of rural New Hampshire. **Conversely, they generally found higher levels of insecticides not in rural farmlands but urban water sources.** Timothy L. Miller, Chief of the USGS Office of Water Quality, speculated that **insecticides are applied more extravagantly to lawns and golf courses than to croplands.**

The study reported good news too, such as DDT's disappearance from a Washington river basin where it persisted long after its 1972 ban. This demonstrates that reducing our use of toxics does in fact reduce their presence in our world.

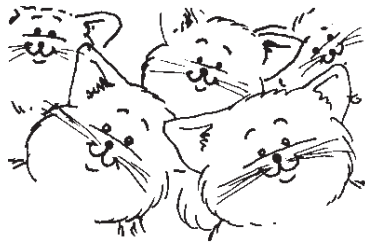
SOURCE: *Science News*, May 22, 2004, C. Lock, <www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m1200/is_21_165/ai_n6110353>. More information is at <www.science.news.org/articles/20040522/fob6ref.asp>.

Pet Litter Selection & Composting

Once again, a STEP reader has provoked us into looking at a topic about which most of us pet owners turn a blind eye: pet litter and waste.

The reader asks: **"Is it safe to put pet litter in the compost or garden?"** The simplest answer is no, especially if your pet is a carnivore. This is because dog and cat waste can contain roundworms and other parasites. If put into the compost, their eggs can wind up on gardeners' hands or on plants. Cat feces in particular can carry the toxoplasmosis parasite, which can survive for years and is resistant to most disinfectants. The parasite is most dangerous to pregnant women and people with immunity problems.

So **what about the neighborhood cats?** It's pretty hard to keep them from pooping in your yard, but large-chunk mulch seems to deter



them somewhat. You can also put chicken wire on top of soil or mulch.

At our house, we certainly have been guilty in the past of putting cat litter in our compost pile. In researching this, however, I read that recommended compost temperatures to kill pathogens are 120° to 140°F for at least 24 hours, and often longer. I know ours does not reach that temperature even in its center, much less on the outer edges. (We are very lazy about proper composting.) So from now on, we'll bury our used litter deep, and away from our food garden! We recommend that you either do this or put it in the trash/landfill, unless you are satisfied your compost is really baking pathogens to safety.

Now, regarding **pet litter products**, the "regular" cheap **bentonite clay litter has problems.** It's not biodegradable, and its dust has been suspected as a cause of cat diseases. (Cats lick a lot of that dust from their fur). When the clay absorbs moisture inside the cat, it expands and can cause digestive problems. (More expansion occurs with clumping clay litter than cheap clay litter.) Along with the irritation of bentonite, the dust contains silica, whose dust is known to cause tumors.

So, for your pet's health, **we suggest using one of the biodegradable, plant-based pet litters** available — for example, SWheatScoop, CareFresh, FIELDFresh, and Yesterday's News (guess what that one is made of!). You can find these at pet stores and online. If you switch pet litters, mix in a bit more of the new litter each day, to allow the pet to get used to it.

There's a wealth of information online about this. Two good starting points for dog and cat owners are:

www.thelighthouseonline.com/marina/articles/natural.html

<http://gardening.wsu.edu/stewardship/compost/petpoop.html>

Look up information about each specific type of animal (rodent, snake, etc.) to see what composting cautions and research papers are available. Generally, any manure needs to be fully composted before use.

ABOUT STEP

The Next STEP (TNS) is published six times a year by the **Sebastopol Toxics Education Program (STEP)**. **STEP is a project of the City of Sebastopol**, implemented by local citizen volunteers. **STEP's mission** is to support city residents in reducing their toxic use and exposure, creating a healthier and safer Sebastopol for everyone.

Past issues of TNS are at <www.ci.sebastopol.ca.us>; look under Programs. **An ongoing index by topic** is at <www.healthyworld.org/STEPindex.html>.

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Printed on recycled paper.

~ Rebecca Dwan