

The Dirt on Green Housecleaners

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It costs twice as much to remove half the grime.

That's the standard — if perhaps outdated — knock on environmentally sensitive cleaning products. Now that more residential housekeeping services are billing themselves as ecofriendly, we wanted to know whether the same ratio might apply to them as well.

No one tracks the total number of home-cleaning companies with a green bent, but it stands to reason that their numbers would be rising. Consumers who buy hybrid cars, recycle their refuse and shop at Whole Foods should at least be receptive to the pitch.

And as more of them go to work in new, ecofriendly buildings, they're more likely to be aware of their home environment too. This is particularly true for parents of children with asthma or allergies that necessitate frequent cleaning with nontoxic products that won't trigger chemical sensitivities.

It's not just office buildings that are going green. Ecofriendly apartment buildings are springing up in many big cities as well, as states give tax incentives for property developers to use solar panels and other energy-saving features in new construction projects.

Perry Phillips, the executive director of the Association of Residential Cleaning Professionals says that the green-cleaning concept is particularly hot on the West Coast, where he figures that up to 50% of companies do some sort of "natural" cleaning. "It's definitely the buzz in the industry right now," he says.

Companies that make the cleaning products say they're receiving more queries from professional cleaners. Jeffrey Hollender, president of market leader Seventh Generation Inc. of Burlington, Vt., points to consumer demand for its products, saying that total sales are up 40% this year, though he declined to divulge exact numbers. He says that the company is twice as big as its next nearest competitor in the natural cleaning-products category.

GREEN CLEANING

- See how five ecofriendly cleaning companies fared in our test.

<http://online.wsj.com/article_print/SB113581428707833414.html#CHRT> home-

SPINS Inc., a San Francisco market-research firm that tracks the natural-products industry, reports that the category of household cleaners and supplies accounted for \$100 million in sales in natural-foods grocery stores and conventional food, drug and mass merchandisers (excluding Wal-Mart) in the 52 weeks ending Nov. 5. That's up 11% from the year-earlier period.

We found most of the home-cleaning services in the major cities where sales of organic and natural products tend to be much higher than the national average. In Los Angeles, we used a local franchise of a national chain with a "healthy touch" cleaning program that uses environmentally "preferable" products. In New York, meanwhile, we sprang for the full "spring cleaning" package from a local outfit that burns essential oils while cleaning and leaves organic chocolate on the pillow.

Turns out we need not have worried about how clean our homes would get. All of our residences, from city apartments to a two-level contemporary in a tiny riverside town, glistened for the most part. In that home near the water, we added a twist to our test and supplied Windex-loving Wanda, our usual cleaner, with products from Seventh Generation and Ecover Belgium NV. She grudgingly admitted that Ecover's glass cleaner was as good, if not better, than the blue stuff. She liked the floor cleaner we supplied her with too. Postcleaning, the overriding scent was of fresh citrus and lavender, not the usual chemical-clean fumes reminiscent of budget hotel chains.

This came as no surprise to Mr. Hollender, who says that his industry has come a long way in recent years. Generally, he says, the product performance among leading natural brands is now close enough to Tide and Mr. Clean that most consumers won't notice the difference, though paper products are one place where the ecocompanies still lag. The price premium, he says, is now down to just 10% or 20% over standard brand-name products too.

The premium sure seemed higher than that for our cleaning services though. Our "spring cleaning" package in Brooklyn cost \$30 an hour per cleaner, three times what our usual housekeeper charges. The branch of the national chain in Los Angeles also levied \$30 an hour, though the company sent a team of three cleaners who were out of our hair in two and a half hours.

The steep prices didn't guarantee perfection in all cases. Our Manhattan service forgot to dust under one of the beds and the Brooklyn service failed to thoroughly clean the toaster. Perhaps that's because there's so much demand for the services that they can afford to miss a few spots; in the San Francisco area, we had to call three services before we found one that followed through with an appointment.

We also did a fair bit of work ourselves. While we appreciated that our cleaning from ZENhome in Brooklyn included window-washing, we hadn't anticipated being perched precariously on our window sills prying them open and holding them steady for our cleaners. One of them was more than half an hour late too, which spoiled the whole Zen-trance thing, though she stayed late to make up for it.

Deanna Hains, ZENhome's owner, says she is aware that large, new windows may be harder to handle for smaller, female cleaners, and that she might adjust staffing on her spring-cleaning crews. "We're a new company, and we're learning and trying to make this as five-star a service as possible," she says.

--Gwendolyn Bounds, Brian Cronk, Kevin J. Delaney and Ethan Smith contributed to this article.

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**SERVICE /LOCATION PRICE/TIME SPENT CLEANLINESS FACTOR
GRUNGE FACTOR COMMENTS Eco-Kind Cleaning**

Oakland, Calif. \$125 total for four cleaners and one supervisor; one hour 20 minutes
Generally high marks for effective cleaning throughout the house A few spots were left dusty and the kitchen table had crumbs and dirty spots. A feather duster was left in our daughter's crib. A good job for a reasonable price. The cleaning seemed just as effective as a traditional cleaning despite the ecofriendly approach.

Private housekeeper

(using products by Seventh Generation and Ecover)

Garrison, N.Y. \$68.66 for 14 cleaning products; \$68 total for one cleaner; four hours
Smell was the most noticeable difference. Instead of the usual hotel-like chemical-clean fumes, the scent was of citrus and lavender. Neither company's laundry detergent left clothes smelling particularly fresh. Products were pricier than nongreen goods, but we found items for nearly every cleaning need.

Green Clean

New York \$115 total for two cleaners; two hours All surfaces were noticeably free of filmy residue, and nontoxic smell was a pleasant improvement. Cleaners forgot to dust under one bed, and we wondered if bathrooms had been fully disinfected. The original quote of \$328 for a 12-hour initial visit seemed way too high for cleaning an apartment.

Maids International

Los Angeles \$225 total for three cleaners; 2 ½ hours The cleaning crew gave the house a thorough scrubbing -- the crew even vacuumed the ceiling. A minor quibble: Cleaners missed a hard-to-reach crevice behind the stove top. The company says it uses a slightly harsher cleaner if mold or mildew in shower or bath make it necessary.

ZENhome

Brooklyn, N.Y. \$300 total for two cleaners; five hours Gee, our home smelled terrific! Cleaners removed everything from cabinets to wipe down surfaces. A few missed spots, and we had to help with the windows Next time, we might buy our own essential oils and give our usual cleaner earth-friendly products to use.

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