

THE PRAGMATIST

Getting a Jump on Spring Cleaning

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BY the time spring arrives, the last thing most of us want to do is spend a weekend cleaning the place where we've been cooped up for several months.



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Tony Centicola

Some years, I ignore the spring-cleaning ritual until we have visitors (which, if I'm lucky, gets me to November). Other years, I get it done before April passes.

But this year seems different. The endless autumn has yielded plenty of 50-degree days to roam outside, so it feels easier to sacrifice a day of decent weather to the gods of sanitation.

Jeff Davidson, the author of "Simpler Living," a manual partly on keeping house, said that early March is the best time for spring cleaning. "You should do it when you really don't want to go outside anyway," he said. "It should be called pre-spring cleaning."

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What You'll Need

That's fine, maybe, if you don't mind the stench caused by cleaning solutions and random janitorial catastrophes. (I'll get to those later.) But with temperatures continuing to hover in the springtime range, I thought I'd throw open the windows and try to get the big chore done.

Before starting, I sought advice from people who know how to do the job properly, and as fast as humanly possible. In addition to Mr. Davidson, I called on Debra Johnson, the training manager for Merry Maids, a national housecleaning service, and Debbie Sardone, vice president of the Clean Team, a publisher of cleaning books and online retailer of nontoxic cleaning products.

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Their advice: spend an hour on shopping and strategy before you start, and you'll save hours of wasted time. Also, check your cabinets, where alternative cleaning tools and agents may lurk.

Like coffee filters, for instance, which Ms. Johnson's employees often use for washing windows. "You'll go through a lot of them, but they do a great job," she said. (Newspaper, she said, leaves ink on your hands; paper towels shed lint on windows.)

Rubbing alcohol and vinegar are also useful. For a home-brewed window cleaner, mix one cup of alcohol with one cup of water and add a tablespoon of white wine vinegar. For an all-purpose cleaning solution, add one-quarter cup of vinegar to a gallon of water.

The scent falls short of store-bought products, but the price is right, and a slight breeze eliminates the smell. Bootleg solutions are also great if you run out of the branded

products. They work just as well as anything you can buy at the store, and some people like the fact that they're less toxic than many mainstream products.

Other important items include a scraper (Scrape & Kleen, \$1.50); two sets of microfiber cloths (Total-Reach, \$10 for six), with one designated for the bathroom; cotton rags (Painters Choice, \$3.29 for a one-pound bag); a duster with an extendable handle (Bona microfiber floor mop with dusting pad, \$24); scrub pads (S.O.S. heavy-duty and all-surface scrubber sponges, \$1.80 each); two buckets (Sterilite 10-quart bucket, \$4.80); a two-sided squeegee (Quickie Home-Pro extending window washer and squeegee, \$15); and a toothbrush (CareOne Surf toothbrush, \$1.50).

Next, lower your expectations. Spring cleaning is ambitious enough, Ms. Sardone said. Don't make it harder.

"Give yourself permission to only do spring cleaning tasks, and leave out things you clean every week or two," she said. "This isn't your tidying day."

If the house is cluttered, spend a day or two on an earlier weekend to clear the mess, she said. Toss unwanted items, sell them on Craigslist or donate them to an organization like Goodwill.

Then clear a day on the calendar, do your shopping and, on the big day, take aim at all the places you routinely ignore.

"Clean all the super high, super low and super tight spots," she said. "If you need to move furniture, or it requires a ladder or special tools you don't normally use when you're cleaning, it's for your spring cleaning list."

While Ms. Sardone recommends beginning with an easy room, Ms. Johnson suggests starting with the most remote one. My tiny master bathroom is the most remote room in my house, so I began there.

First, I lugged a vacuum and a step stool upstairs, filled one bucket with warm water and loaded my supplies into the other.

In the supply bucket was a 32-ounce bottle of cleaning solution that I'd heated in the microwave on high, for about a minute. "It's almost as good as having a steam cleaner," Ms. Johnson said.

I then cleared every surface, sprayed liberally and let the solution soak for a minute before scrubbing.

The soaking step saved me time and effort, but I still spent an hour on the bathroom's baseboards and high edges. I also scrubbed the inside of the windowsill and vacuumed the dust-laden fins of the baseboard heater, behind the register.

When I got ready to leave after 90 minutes, I expected the bathroom to look spotless, but because I had cleaned obscure places, I barely noticed the difference.

Noticeable or not, Mr. Davidson said, it's important work. "Lack of dust means better breathing, fresher smell, lower bacteria count," he said. "Plus the personal satisfaction of knowing you did a thorough job."

Still, I sprayed down the vanity for good measure, to prove to my wife, Karen, that I had been there.

Next came the bedroom, where the spring-cleaning ritual calls for steam-cleaning or vacuuming the mattress, Ms. Johnson said, to get rid of dust and mites.

Easy enough — at least with my new vacuum. (The powerful, nicely designed Dyson will be available later this month for \$450.) Steam cleaning requires a device that costs \$300 or more, and Ms. Sardone said the process takes no more time than vacuuming. But for long-neglected mattresses, it's highly effective, she said.

I then cleared space by moving furniture away from the walls. After that, I placed an old sheet on the bed and filled it with loose items, like the countless sentimental

knickknacks atop my wife's antique dresser and my 64 half-read New Yorker magazines, which I'm collecting as part of an extended experiment in self-delusion.

After an hour of dusting and scrubbing, I had arrived at what Ms. Sardone said was the final step, vacuuming the floor.

"I thought we're supposed to leave things like that off the spring-cleaning list," I said.

"Sure, but vacuuming that room is the reward," she said. "It's like the cherry on top of the [ice cream](#) sundae."

I remembered that image as I returned the items to my wife's dresser and slid it back against the wall.

At which point the rear legs, which are connected by a narrow plank, caught on a floorboard and snapped.

The dresser pitched backward. It was a Victoria Falls of everything my wife deems valuable.

I suppose I was lucky that only three items broke: a ceramic piggy bank made by Karen's aunt 60 years ago, and given to Karen's mother; a ceramic "forever box" made by my daughter four years ago; and a large bottle of Calvin Klein CK One perfume.

After 45 minutes of gluing and wiping up — and, yes, vacuuming — my toxic sludge sundae was finished. I smelled like a Calvin Klein model who'd gone on a vinegar bender.

For the next two hours I cleaned baseboards in hallways and living rooms, wiped dust from ceiling fans and eliminated a set of tread marks from a wall.

Then, before I lost too much sunlight, I grabbed the coffee filters and the squeegee for a side-by-side window test.

The filters were good for wiping dirt from the surface (I used them to spread the window cleaner across the surface, and the textured material of the filter scrubbed away all of the grit). When I followed with a swipe of cloth, the windows looked great. The squeegee was slightly messier (I used rags to catch the drips), but exponentially faster.

I blew through around 20 windows in 15 minutes, including a few higher ones that I reached by extending the pole. It was the day's most valuable tool. (Two cups of the home-brewed window cleaning solution did the trick.)

Finally, I approached the kitchen, with an eye to the refrigerator coil. Ms. Johnson claimed this object requires cleaning, since dirty coils make your refrigerator work harder than it should, and can therefore lead to breakdowns. I was not aware of this, nor did I have any idea how to find the coil.

I called General Electric; Melissa, a customer service representative, told me to unscrew the rear grate, which required pulling the refrigerator away from the wall. And there sat the condenser and parts of the coil, wrapped in a half-inch blanket of dust.

"You're like the fourth call in a row I've had with this question," she said. "It must be early spring cleaning."

The First Step: Remove All Clutter

MAINTENANCE specialists say homeowners shouldn't try to clear a home of clutter and thoroughly clean it on the same weekend.

"You won't be happy with the results," said [Jeff Davidson, the author of "Breathing Space."](#) "And you'll be exhausted."

Mr. Davidson suggested breaking spring-cleaning into stages, with the first stage devoted to clearing. Buy some boxes and go room to room over the course of several

days.

“Box up stuff you haven’t used for a while, and put it in the attic or garage and write the date on the box,” he said. “Next year at this time, open it up, and if you have any notion to keep it, go ahead. If not, give it away.”

In addition to local charity-based thrift shops, try the Salvation Army and Goodwill, which accept donations of unwanted household items in good condition. The donations are tax deductible.

The Salvation Army offers free pickup that can be scheduled by phone (800-728-7825) or, in some cases, online (at satruck.org); Goodwill’s drop-off locations are listed on its Web site (goodwill.org).

If your items don’t qualify for donation, you can make dump runs using a rented truck from Lowe’s (\$19 for the first 75 minutes) or Home Depot (\$20 for the first 75 minutes), or you could try giving them away through Craigslist’s free classifieds.

Craigslist is useful in other ways, Mr. Davidson said.

“When you schedule a day to clear out or clean the house, post an ad for short-term help,” he said. “High schoolers will come for \$8 or \$10 an hour, and they’ll do a bang-up job.”

In Any Season

SPRING cleaning is easier if a home is well kept to begin with. Here are some tips from housecleaning experts to save time on weekly cleaning duties.

- Clean when you’re already dirty. “Before showering, look for 8 to 10 minutes of cleaning tasks to do,” said **Jeff Davidson, author of “Breathing Space,”** a housekeeping manual.
- Wherever possible, let an appliance do the work. For instance, said Debra Johnson, training manager of Merry Maids, a national cleaning service, “If you have globe light covers that are dirty, put them in the dishwasher.”
- If it’s clean enough, skip it. Vertical surfaces don’t collect as much dirt as horizontal ones, said Debbie Sardone, vice president of the Clean Team, a publisher of cleaning books and retailer of cleaning products, so pick your spots accordingly.
- Work from top to bottom. Dust and dirt will loosen as you work, Ms. Sardone said, so this approach prevents wasted effort.
- Buy a good vacuum, preferably a canister type that can occasionally perform heavier duties like cleaning venetian blinds or pulling coffee grounds from a carpeted corner. “You don’t need to spend \$1,000,” Ms. Sardone said. “We’ve used dozens of them, and for the cheapest price and highest quality, the ones that work best will cost \$300 to \$400.”