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## Spring Cleaning, a Shared Tradition

By Sophie Braccini



Elsi Mastick takes her spring cleaning seriously

Photo Sophie Braccini

week period, people will not only clean their house, but they will dispose of old and used items, then they will reconnect with family and friends. Here it is hard to do, but we still continue to collect all our old clothes and unused appliances and give them to those who have a use for them."

Moraga's Elsi Mastick shares the same tradition, but from a quite different ethnic background. "My origins are half Swiss, half Italian," explains Mastick, "I learned from my mother that closets need to be regularly emptied to make room for the new, and I continue to practice the ritual complete spring cleaning, now with a little outside help."

But some Lamorindans are concerned with the harm chemical cleaning products can bring to our environment and our homes. "Our valiant cleaning efforts can actually make our homes less safe and less healthy," says Steve Richard, co-founder of Sustainable Lafayette. "Most of the conventional cleaning products that we all grew up with are petroleum-based and have toxic ingredients. If we took inventory at the average American home we'd find 63 synthetic chemical products, adding up to about ten gallons of harmful chemicals. Because of that and other toxic sources, the EPA has found that indoor air pollution can be up to 100 times higher than outdoor air pollution."

Susan JunFish of Moraga, the head of Parents For a Safer Environment, agrees, "I did extensive research seven years ago on the toxicity of cleaning products and safer alternatives, which I presented at a conference we convened in May of 2003," says JunFish. "Chlorine bleach (sodium hypochlorite) is very hazardous, breaking down to trihalomethanes upon coming into contact with any organic substance. Trihalomethanes are precursors to chemicals that trigger cancer. I don't have any bleach in the house and highly recommend against using it since there are safer alternatives."

"Green" cleaning products are indeed now available almost everywhere. But there too, buyer beware. "Cleaning products are not required to list their ingredients and so most, even the "environmentally friendly" ones, do not," says Laurie Walter, founder of Chartreuse, a Lafayette-based company that manufactures and sells natural cleaning products, "this becomes especially annoying when you realize that most environmental claims have no legal definition. 'Biodegradable' means that it breaks down eventually. 'Plant-based' or 'plant-derived' means an ingredient started out as a plant but anything could have been done to it. 'Nontoxic' means the company believes it to be so."

It's hard to miss the signs -- spring is almost here! Already sprightly bulbs revive our roadsides, scattered showers mix with bright sun and fruit trees are beginning to bear bunches of blossoms. As the birds sing away in the gardens, we want to open our windows to the spring's milder winds; a feeling of lightness fills our homes. The days grow longer and our circadian rhythms adjust; our bodies produce less melatonin, giving us increased energy. Perhaps it's no wonder that many traditions link this time of year with a thorough house cleaning. To many, spring cleaning is a spiritual act, an opportunity to get rid of the old and make room for the new, to bring order, beauty and harmony to the physical environment.

Cleaning traditions have existed for thousands of years. Some ancient societies cleaned before the onset of winter. Others used the longer hours of daylight in the spring and summer to get their abodes thoroughly cleaned and dried. The Chinese have a long tradition of cleaning their homes before the lunar New Year to rid them of bad luck. Spring cleaning is often linked to religious practices, for example, observant Jews have always cleaned their homes before Pesach, or Passover, to ensure that no traces of leavened foods (chametz) remain in the home.

"Some trace the origin of spring cleaning to Norouz, the Persian Zoroastrian New Year tradition that started some 2500 years ago in our region and coincides with the spring equinox," says Katty Amirdeflan of Orinda, "it has a symbolic meaning; it signifies leaving the old behind, both spiritually and physically." Iranians today continue the practice of "khooneh tekouni" which literally means "shaking the house." Everything in the house is thoroughly cleaned, from drapes to floors, and windows to furniture.

"Here in America we do not have the thirteen days of vacation that's the custom in Iran," says Mariam Atefi of Moraga, "there, over a two-

Carol Shenon, who teaches asthma prevention for the Contra Costa Coalition, gives out a list of everyday-use cleaning products that can be made at home. "It is much less expensive than buying ready-made products," says the Moraga mom, "I clean my floor with distilled white vinegar and water and for an all-purpose cleaner I use baking soda with vinegar and lemon juice." Shenon adds that she trusts Seventh Generation cleaning products, which are readily available in most drugstores, for some of her other cleaning needs.

"In Iran people use vinegar, water and old newspapers to clean windows," says Amirdefan, "they are very big on recycling and green products. When I was growing up there my nanny told me to never use detergent but to use rice water instead." She now uses "green" products that she buys at Costco and plans to continue the ancestral tradition with her family this coming spring. "When you clean everything you feel good about yourself," adds Amirdefan, "then you do it for your soul, you do it in your heart, and you call on friends you had a bit of a disagreement with. And then you are ready to start a new year, rejuvenated from the inside out."

### Resources For a "Green" Spring Cleaning

Do It Yourself - a list from the Contra Costa Asthma Coalition

All purpose cleaners:

- For counter stains, squeeze lemon juice on stain and let sit for 45 minutes. Sprinkle baking soda and rub with cloth.
- For general cleaning, add 1 teaspoon of liquid soap to 8 ounces of water in a spray bottle, or mix one part vinegar with 9 parts water.

Bathrooms:

- Tub and sink: sprinkle baking soda and rub with a wet rag.
- Toilet: sprinkle baking soda inside the toilet, add a couple of drops of vegetable-based liquid soap, scrub with toilet brush.
- Mold: scrub with lemon juice or white vinegar at full strength.

Floor:

- Mop linoleum and tiled floors with a mixture of 1/2 cup white vinegar and warm water. The scent will go away after the floor dries.
- For wooden floors, use vegetable-based liquid soap and 2 gallons of hot water. Rinse floor with water afterwards.

Windows and mirrors:

- Add 1/4 cup of vinegar to spray bottle and fill with water; spray on surface, rub with newspaper or lint-free rag.

Dusting:

- Use magnetic cloth to dust without water, or use a damp, lint-free 100% cotton cloth such as an old cotton t-shirt.

Buying "green" cleaning products

Many brands of "green" cleaning products are available at local drugstores such as CVS, OSH in Moraga, Moraga Hardware and Lumber and Across the Way (which carry an extensive range of Mrs. Myers products, and some hard to find products such as Vaska laundry detergent, Holy Cow and Caldrea), and Lafayette Ace Hardware.

Chartreuse products are available at Diablo Foods and Lavande in Lafayette, as well as at the company's new headquarters, 3454 Mount Diablo Blvd. in Lafayette.



Mariam Atefi and her two sons, Omeed and Rameen, take away old items Photo Sophie Braccini



Laurie Walter with her line of natural cleaning products Photo Sophie Braccini

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