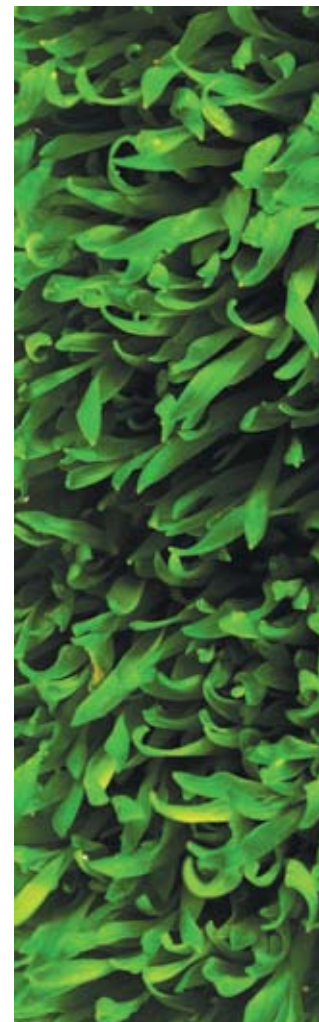


Greening Your Kitchen

From cooking to cleaning, three easy ways to “green up” the heart of the home

By Christopher O’Hara



When I left for work this morning, I asked my wife if I could bring anything home later. She said, “white tulips for the kitchen.” I guess it’s just human nature, but when we see spring reclaiming the world outside, we want to bring a little bit of that feeling inside our homes as well. That happens when we buy fresh flowers or plants, but it also happens every day in our kitchen. When we cook, we bring nature inside our home and it sustains us.

At the epicenter of our homes, the kitchen is where most families make the greatest environmental impact. This spring, my wife, Jen, and I are determined to get greener, and it all starts in the kitchen. Here are some tips on three ways you can make your kitchen a better place for the environment by shopping greener, cleaning greener, and updating your kitchen with appliances and accessories that make cooking greener.

Shopping Green

The biggest impact we can make in the kitchen starts in the supermarket. I tend to do our family’s grocery shopping and, like most people, don’t really dedicate too much thought to my environmental impact when shopping. I’m just trying to get enough stuff to keep two adults, two hungry kids, a baby, and two dogs happy for the week. With an army-size family depending on my shopping skills, I don’t have an enormous amount of energy left for the environment, but I can do a few things. Here are three really easy changes I am making this year:

Dispense Water: Instead of buying a case or two of disposable plastic water bottles, I have started buying the 5-gallon refrigerator dispenser. That saves more than 50 plastic bottles from ending up in a landfill. Better yet, it saves tons of room in the fridge, and guarantees that there’s always some ice-cold water around when you need it.

Buy in Bulk: As someone who enjoys a good bargain (my wife calls it “being cheap”), I never thought my insistence on monthly Costco runs would have an environmental impact. Since 10 percent of your shopping dollar goes to packaging, it is estimated that a family of four can save up to \$2,000 a year by buying products in bulk instead of choosing smaller sizes. That means savings on our landfills, too. Buying cereal, sugar, flour, and other staples in bulk is easier on your wallet—and the environment.

Go Paperless: They say one of the biggest things a growing family can do

for the environment is switch from disposable diapers to cloth. Although I’m currently caring for a six-month-old baby, I have to admit that cleaning diapers isn’t on my agenda at the moment. What I can do, however, is eliminate a lot of the paper waste from my kitchen by cleaning with washcloths rather than paper towels. Cleaning surfaces with a hot washcloth is much more effective than the surface cleaning that can be achieved with a paper towel—and less expensive in the bargain.

Just making those three small changes can mean a lot for the environment and save a lot of money in the bargain. Being more conscious of packaging when you shop (less is better), buying locally when you can (saving fuel used in transportation and supporting your local growers), and bringing your own bags to the supermarket helps, too.

Equipping Green

Unless you live in a brand-new house or recently updated your kitchen, you’ll probably be upgrading appliances or fixtures in your kitchen sooner or later. Some of the decisions you make can really have a long-term impact on the environment.

Upgrade Your Fridge: Did you know that your refrigerator is probably the single biggest energy-consuming appliance in our home? Selecting approved Energy Star appliances when you upgrade or replace your equipment guarantees that you will be purchasing an appliance that is up to 20 percent more efficient than federal standards—and an unbelievable 40 percent more efficient than similar models produced in 2001. There are an estimated 47 million refrigerators more than 10 years old in America. If yours is one of them, it may be time to upgrade!

Smart Dishwashing: Because it uses so much hot water to clean, the dishwasher is one of the most eco-unfriendly appliances in the home. Having a newer, Energy Star–approved model helps, but you can also help reduce your dishwasher’s impact on the environment by following a few easy guidelines. First, since you can’t control the amount of water the dishwasher uses, make sure every load you run is as full as possible. Second, avoid using longer wash cycles: most dishwashers have a “short cycle” that gets the job done just as well as the regular cycle. This can save up to 30 percent in energy. Finally, avoid



using the “rinse-hold” and “pre-rinse” features. A single-cycle wash is usually enough to get the job done.

Switch Your Lighting: The highest-use lighting fixtures in a home are the kitchen ceiling lights. If you are replacing your old fixtures, buying newer Energy Star-rated fixtures will automatically produce a 25 percent efficiency increase. Equipping your new or existing fixtures with compact fluorescent lights (CFLs) can have an even more dramatic impact. We have made the switch to CFLs throughout our house and, with an average lifespan of more than five years, changing light bulbs is starting to become a chore of the past. CFLs use up to 75 percent less energy while producing 75 percent less heat, which means increased cooling efficiency during the summer months. Just changing a few fixtures in your kitchen can mean big positive environmental impact and cost savings for the typical family.

Building Materials: If you are undergoing an extensive renovation, there are literally hundreds of eco-friendly choices that can go into the modern kitchen, starting with choosing your surfaces. The combination of explosive growth in the home “DIY” market and the “green” market have created an environment ripe for launching sustainable home products. Now consumers can choose among marble, granite, tile—and eco-friendly “green” countertops made from recycled materials. Some popular green choices include recycled glass tiles; composite countertops made from recycled glass, metal, or even seed shells; and 100 percent recycled aluminum tiles. Choosing cabinets built from eco-friendly wheatboard or strawboard rather than formaldehyde-containing MDF (medium-density fiberboard) panels can also make a big difference.

Cleaning Green

There’s clean and then there’s clean. Trust me, I know the difference. When you marry an aggressively type-A Italian woman, you start to learn the difference. Even after 14 years of persistent training in all manner of general household cleaning, I can honestly say that I still have much to learn. The type of deep cleaning my wife excels at can only be described as antiseptic. This level of cleanliness is achieved by a weekly cleaning by two local women and ongoing daily work around the house by my wife, Jennifer. The area underneath my sink features an impressive array of household cleaners, including Windex, Clorox

Cleanup, Fantastic, Mr. Clean, Ajax, and all manner of sprays, powders, aerosols, and gels designed to send household dirt and pathogens to a citrus-scented death.

Although I have dabbled in the past with “green” cleaning products, with varying degrees of success, it seemed like a good time to give the new breed of household cleaners a try. Lots of new green products have come out in the past few years, and some looked tough enough to pass the “Jen test.” Here are some notes on what I found:

Clorox Green Works: Clorox’s new Green Works line claims the reliability and strength of an old standby with the promise of being environmentally friendly. Made from plant- and mineral-based ingredients such as corn-based ethanol and essential lemon oil, and promising to be biodegradable and animal-friendly, I put the “all-purpose” cleaner up against Formula 409 on a stove and countertop smeared with clam sauce, and found it just as effective—and a lot better-smelling. The “glass and surface” cleaner was just as effective as Windex at removing water, soap, and toothpaste marks from a large bathroom mirror and countertop—although plain white vinegar and water performed equally well. I also sampled the “natural dilutable” cleaner as a potential replacement for my existing floor cleaner (and all-purpose spray cleaner for bathroom duty) and found it up to some heavy tasks like removing stubborn scuffs from our painted-wood floors—and as a general grease remover. If Green Works cleaning power and competitive pricing (around \$3 for most products) wasn’t enough to convince you to switch to “green” cleaning, then surely Clorox’s unlikely alliance with the Sierra Club may convince even the most skeptical of environmentalists.

Seventh Generation: Unlike traditional cleaning-products companies, Seventh Generation comes by its green credentials without the help of the Sierra Club. Founded 18 years ago, the Vermont-based company wants to be the world’s most trusted brand of green home-cleaning products. Interestingly, its name is derived from an old Iroquois saying that states, “In every deliberation, we must consider the impact of our decisions on the next seven generations.” Wow! And you thought that you were only buying toilet bowl cleaner! I put Seventh Generation’s citrusy cleaner to the test against both Fantastic and my home-diluted mixture of Mr. Clean, and found that it held its own. Although nothing banishes chili grease as well as a strong mixture of Mr. Clean and water,

GREEN HOUSEKEEPING



Here are two local green cleaning services:

OrganiClean
organicleaning.net
 (632) 662-9440

Maid Brigade of Long Island
longisland.maidbrigade.com
 Nassau: (516) 937-MAID
 Suffolk: (631) 246-MAID

For more information, visit these Websites:

Energy Star
energystar.gov
 Find Energy Star-approved products on this government Website.

Simple Green
simplegreen.com
 Non-toxic, biodegradable cleaning products.

Seventh Generation
seventhgeneration.com
 Environmentally friendly cleaning products, tips, and community.

I found that Seventh Generation worked hard enough—and I enjoyed the orange scent. Seventh Generation makes an effort to list all of its product's ingredients, and promises to be totally non-toxic and biodegradable, use no petroleum-based solvents—and it's even Kosher! Who knew?

Simple Green: They say that necessity is the mother of invention. In 1978, long before “green” products were on anyone's radar, a man named Bruce FaBrizio was trying to figure out how to remove tannin from coffee-roasting machines without using toxic chemicals. After three years, he came up with a biodegradable, nontoxic, non-abrasive solution he called Simple Green. He began to sell the product in 55-gallon drums to automobile shops and factories, and, many years later, to consumer stores. Simple Green's best-known product is its “all-purpose cleaner” in concentrated form. I am a longtime fan of Simple Green, and I can't think of a time when a bottle of the all-purpose cleaner hasn't been in my garage. Gentle enough to clean a marble countertop yet strong enough to take the grease off a car engine, Simple Green means business. Because it is concentrated, I like to purchase the one-gallon size and have it available in multiple formulations: 50 percent strength for the garage, where I use it to degrease my barbecue grill and wash the car; 25 percent strength for use in the laundry room as a pre-wash for tough stains; and 10 percent strength in the kitchen, where I use it on the surfaces around the oven. Be sure to check out the lemon-scented version of the all-purpose cleaner as well.

Using any of these green cleaners is a great way to minimize your family's impact on the environment. Reducing the use of chlorine- and ammonia-based cleaners from the kitchen means taking a lot of harmful chemicals out of our lakes and streams. But is “green cleaning” as effective as “regular” cleaning? According to Simple Green's marketing specialist Denise Dochnahl, “Effective is a relative term. If your top priority for cleaning is to be as environmentally sensitive as possible, then certainly using green cleaning solutions is going to be more effective for you; if your top priority is to get the job done quickly and with minimal effort, ‘green’ may not be more effective for you.”

Chris O'Hara is the author of six popular cookbooks. He lives in Huntington.

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