



PHOTO BY POVY KENDAL ATCHISON

## Au Revoir, Allergens

With a few simple strategies, you can reduce the most common sources of indoor allergens—chemicals, mold and mites.

BY MARY CORDARO

**ALLERGY SENSITIVITIES ARE ON THE RISE.** They've doubled since the 1970s, according to a 2005 study by the National Institutes of Health. Some of that increase may be because most of us spend up to 90 percent of our time indoors, meaning we are almost constantly exposed to airborne allergens in our offices, homes and cars.

The most common home allergens are particulates and chemicals. Particulates include seasonal pollen, mold, dust, dust mites and animal dander. Indoor chemicals associated with allergies include formaldehyde, volatile organic compounds (chemicals that outgas from products such as plywood and fiberboard), conventional paint and finishes, and permanent fabric treatments. By improving air flow and reducing sources of particulates, chemicals and moisture, we can reduce our homes' levels of typical airborne allergens. Here are some strategies.

One of the easiest ways to reduce our homes' chemical and dust loads is to remove shoes upon entering the house.

### PARTICLE MATTERS

Many of the chemicals in our homes are tracked in from our shoes and pets' feet. One of the easiest ways to reduce our homes' chemical loads is to remove shoes upon entering the house. We can also reduce exposure to tracked-in grime by making bedrooms off-limits to pets.

To control allergens that do get in, vacuum frequently, including upholstered furniture, with a HEPA vacuum independently certified to capture at least 99 percent of particulates. This is especially important if you have wall-to-wall carpet or pets. If you don't have a HEPA vacuum, open windows while vacuuming and for 30 minutes afterward, as non-HEPA vacuums can stir up allergens. You might also invest in a HEPA air cleaner that filters particulates such as dust, pollen, dander and mold. The best HEPA cleaners contain carbon for chemical filtering.

### MOISTURE PATROL

Moisture helps create an ideal environment for mold and other allergens. One of the most common sources of indoor moisture is condensation from bathing and cooking. Run exhaust fans when cooking and for 30 minutes after bathing, even if your bathroom has a window. (Make sure exhaust fans vent to the outdoors.) While fans are running, it's wise to crack a nearby window to provide a source of makeup air (see "This House Doesn't Suck" below). Outdoor moisture may also lead to indoor mold. Make sure your home's drainage directs water away from foundation walls.

In basements, avoid materials mold thrives on such as drywall and carpet. Instead, choose hard materials such as concrete, ceramic, tile and stone. Keep moist basement air out of living spaces by installing an airtight seal around the basement door and caulking holes where plumbing and electrical wires pass from the basement to the ground floor. Also install weatherproofing around attic doors.

Carpet cleaning and humidifying increase indoor moisture. If carpet doesn't dry quickly after cleaning, you may end up with low levels of mold you can't see or smell. Use chemical-free cleaning methods that require the least water, and only clean carpets when humidity is low and you can open windows. If you hire professionals, ask them to extract as much moisture as possible. If you use a humidifier, use filtered water and clean the reservoir with 3 percent hydrogen peroxide before refilling to prevent mold and bacteria.

### DEATH TO DUST MITES

The average bed is home to 100,000 to 10 million dust mites. Along with their favorite food—our skin particles—mites thrive on warmth, moisture and darkness. Before making the bed, pull back covers and air bedding, reducing moisture. When it's sunny, air bedding outdoors. Wash sheets in hot water weekly if you are dust mite-sensitive. Unless they are filled with organic or chemical-free wool, which is naturally mite-resistant, encase mattresses, pillows and comforters with nontoxic dust mite barrier covers tightly woven to at least 4.91 microns. Seek barrier covers that are free of PVC and antimicrobial, stain- or wrinkle-resistant treatments (see Resources).

### INCREASE AIR FLOW

Unless you have seasonal pollen allergies or live in a highly polluted area, open windows whenever weather allows. Fresh air and sunlight are great remedies for high levels of particulates, mites, moisture and chemicals. For fast relief, open windows and turn on all exhaust fans. Whole-house fans ventilate your entire home. If you install one, make certain its exhaust is mechanically vented to the outdoors, not into the attic.

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### This House Doesn't Suck

When you turn on your furnace, air conditioner or exhaust fans, your home may become "negatively pressurized," an effect that causes indoor air to "suck in" pollutants from basements, wall cavities, attics and crawl spaces. To prevent this effect, keep all interior doors open and crack one window on each floor when furnace or fans are running. Change furnace filters when you see grime buildup, or once every six months.

### RESOURCES

#### MATTRESS BARRIER ENCASEMENTS

Allergy Store  
allergystore.com/  
organic-mattress-covers.htm

Organic Mattresses, Inc.  
omimattress.com

#### HEPA VACUUMS

Miele  
mieleusa.com

Nilfisk  
nilfiskcfm.com

#### HEPA ROOM AIR FILTERS

Honeywell  
cleanairfacility.com

IQAir  
iqair.com

Mary Cordaro Inc  
marycordaro.com

# Pure & Simple

Plant essential oils bring cleaning power and a fresh scent to your home—without chemicals.

**WE PUT A LOT OF WORK** into creating clean, healthy homes for ourselves and our families. And for most of us, our idea of a healthy home doesn't include toxic chemicals. Yet many of us spray on and breathe in potentially toxic ingredients every time we use common household cleaning products.

Fortunately, nature has provided us with a bevy of alternatives to synthetic chemicals: Plant essential oils clean, disinfect and smell great. Studies have found many to have antimicrobial properties. Use the blends below for a house that's clean *and* nontoxic. (As with any new product you introduce into your home, be sure to read the instructions for each ingredient to ensure safe and effective use.)

**SURFACE CLEANER:** Add 7 drops lavender, eucalyptus, tea tree, cinnamon, clove, thyme, pine, grapefruit or oregano oil to 2 cups of water. Spray on surfaces.

**KITCHEN CLEANER:** Mix the following essential oils: 8 drops lavender, 10 drops lemon, 5 drops eucalyptus, 8 drops rosewood and 3 drops palma rosa. Combine 2 cups of water with 8 drops of the mixture and spray on surfaces.

**DISHWASHING BOOST:** To add fragrance or to improve the antiseptic action of your liquid soap, add 10 drops of essential oils such as lavender, orange, bergamot or lime to 3 ounces of natural liquid dishwashing soap and shake well.

**FLOOR CLEANER:** Combine ¼ cup of white vinegar with 10 drops lemon oil and 4 drops oregano oil. Add to a bucket of water. For extra cleaning power, add several drops of dish soap, but follow with a clean-water mop so floors aren't slippery.

**WINDOW CLEANER:** In a spray bottle, combine 1 cup white vinegar, 10 to 15 drops lemon oil and 1 cup water. Shake well before each use. In summer, repel flies by wiping windows with a cloth dampened with 2 ounces water and 10 drops lavender or lemongrass essential oils.

**AIR FRESHENER:** To keep indoor air smelling fresh, mix 8 drops of essential oil with 2½ cups warm water. (Use a single scent or 8 drops of this combination: 5 drops bergamot, 10 drops lavender, 5 drops cinnamon, 10 drops lemon, 10 drops citronella.) Store in a spray bottle and shake well before use.

**FLEA KILLER:** Mix 2 cups borax with 10 to 15 drops of essential oils. Try pine or balsam fir in fall and winter; and lemongrass, lavender or any citrus oils in spring and summer. Sprinkle on carpets, then wait a few minutes before vacuuming.

**HOT TUB CLEANER:** To disinfect and fragrance the water in a hot tub, add 3 drops of lavender, cinnamon, clove, eucalyptus, thyme or grapefruit essential oil per person that uses the tub.

— NANCY CHRISTIE



You can make a nontoxic floor cleaner with white vinegar, lemon oil and oregano oil.

## Buying Tips

Choosing high-quality oils is essential.

### KNOW YOUR TERMS

"Fragrance oil," "nature-identical oil" or "perfume oil" aren't the same as 100 percent pure essential oil. They may be combinations of essential oils and chemicals, or just plain chemicals.

### CHECK THE CONTAINER

Avoid oils in plastic bottles or with rubber eyedropper bulbs in the top. These can degrade and contaminate the oil. Look for small (4-ounce or less) dark or opaque glass bottles.

### READ THE LABEL

Look for the correct botanical (Latin) name to ensure you're buying the right oil.



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# Weed Eater

Easy-growing weeds are surprisingly tasty and packed with nutrients.

**LONG USED AS CLEANSING TONICS**, easy-to-find spring weeds are rich in vitamins and minerals. Local weeds' leaves, flowers and roots make yummy additions to salads, soups and other dishes. If you're collecting weeds in the wild, be certain you are foraging from a location free of pesticides and chemical fertilizers. Proper identification is essential; invest in a great guide like *A Field Guide to Edible Wild Plants* or seek out a local herbalist or botanist to take you on a "weed walk." Otherwise, you can grow weeds with virtually no maintenance in a container or your yard. You'll be eating up the free harvest in no time!

**CHICKWEED** (*Stellaria media*): Delicate and high in vitamin C, chickweed leaves taste like spinach. Steam young leaves, or use leaves and flowers in soups, salads and stir-fries.

**DANDELION** (*Taraxacum officinale*): Best harvested in early spring before the plant flowers, young dandelion leaves have a tasty, mildly bitter flavor. With high levels of iron, potassium and beta-carotene, dandelion stimulates digestion and aids the liver. You can also eat the roots—scrub and slice them, then sauté in sesame oil and soy sauce.

**LAMB'S-QUARTERS** (*Chenopodium album*): The leaves taste like spinach and are supernutritious—they're loaded with calcium, beta-carotene and vitamin C. Eat them raw or cook them into casseroles, grain salads and egg dishes.

**NETTLES** (*Urtica dioica*): This classic spring green, known for its stinging hairs, sounds intimidating to eat (and gloves are necessary when collecting), but the leaves lose their sting when cooked. Usually added to soups or steamed like spinach, nettles are high in immune-boosting iron, beta-carotene and vitamin C, and help alleviate allergy symptoms.

**PURSLANE** (*Portulaca oleracea*): High in alpha-linolenic acid, a brain-boosting omega-3 fatty acid, and vitamin C, purslane leaves, stems, flowers and roots are all edible. Purslane can be added to cold soups or blended into pesto.

**VIOLETS** (*Viola* spp.): In shades of purple, white or yellow, violets are the most beautiful of the spring weeds. Add the lovely flowers, rich in vitamin C, to salads, stuffings or desserts, or try the young, tender violet leaves steamed or in salads.

— AMY MAYFIELD



## Favorite Wilted Greens

Gather fresh, wild weeds such as chickweed, dandelion, nettles and violet leaves. You can mix these with cultivated greens such as spinach, kale, arugula and chard.

8 to 10 cups fresh and cultivated greens  
1 to 2 tablespoons olive oil  
3 cloves garlic, chopped  
Salt and pepper

1. Wash greens and remove tough midribs if necessary. Spin or pat greens dry. Chop roughly.
2. In a large pot, heat olive oil over medium heat and add garlic. Stir 1 minute. Add greens, stir and cover. Cook for about 5 minutes, stirring occasionally, until greens are bright green and tender. Season lightly with salt and pepper and enjoy. Serves 2

— SUSAN BELSINGER AND TINA MARIE WILCOX