

# A test of eight green bathroom-cleaning products

Forget the butcher, the baker, and the candlestick maker -- if your rub-a-dub tub is filled with grime and grub, it's time to scrub. But with what? Before you reach for just any cleaner, ask yourself whether those scrubby bubbles are going to make your bathroom surfaces even more toxic. To help you avoid soap-scummy gunk *and* harmful chemicals, I've taken a down-and-dirty look at a number of green-cleaning products.



If she'd used Borax, she'd already be at the ball.

Much like when [shopping for detergents](#), I steered the cart away from products that include [phosphates](#) (which cause harmful algal blooms) and **bleach**, a lung irritant. You might also look for products listed as **petroleum free** (for obvious, oil-related reasons) and **biodegradable**, as many of these products will get washed down the sink or tub after use. Read the product labels -- if they have strong warnings about the product's hazards, that's a

good sign to steer clear. Check out this [handy guide](#) [PDF] for more information.

In choosing which products to test, I grabbed a range of options -- from powder to liquid sprays to cream cleansers that combine properties of both. On the advice of several Grist readers, I even tried "less-product-y products" like baking soda and Borax -- and was pleasantly surprised with the results.

Since I keep my own bathroom sparkling clean with a strict regimen of preventative care (ahem), I sought out a test bathroom in the home of a Grist staffer who will remain unnamed. The bathroom she shares with six roommates proved the perfect testing ground.

## Grist's Pick

### **20 Mule Team Borax**

4 lbs. 12 oz. powder

\$4.49

I used each product on the walls and floors of the house's shower stalls. Most of the products cleaned well enough on the wall tile -- which wasn't as dirty to begin with. The floor was the real battleground, though, its textured surface covered in black grime. That's where I found clean evidence of each product's relative efficacy.

Here are the results:

---

### **Pure Baking Soda**

16 oz. powder, \$1.15

**Eco-claims:** Safe, effective cleaning and deodorizing

**Ingredients:** Sodium bicarbonate (an antacid)

**Cleaning instructions:** Sprinkle baking soda on a damp sponge or cloth for cleaning of all countertops, appliances, metal cabinets, and tile.

**Smell:** No scent. At all.

**Elbow grease required:** elbow injury imminent

**Resulting sparkle:** a glint

Buy [one little box of this stuff](#) and you're set for litterbox odor control, tooth whitening, laundry, household cleaning, minor skin irritations, fridge freshening, and upset stomachs -- not to mention baking, of course! It was a little messy sprinkling the powder onto the damp sponge, and I had to reapply it a number of times, but the baking soda's grit did get some of the grime out. This one required a lot of elbow grease though -- for not as much return as some of the other products.

---

### **[Biokleen Soyblends Kitchen & Bath Soy Cream Cleaner](#)**

32 fl. oz. cream, \$4.69

**Eco-claims:** Natural, nontoxic, biodegradable; no negative effects on rivers, streams, plants, or wildlife; kind to those with chemical sensitivities and allergies; no artificial fragrance, colors, or preservatives; 99 percent VOC free and ozone safe; contains no: phosphate, chlorine, ammonia, petroleum solvents, alcohol, butyl, glycol ether, SLS ([sodium lauryl sulfate](#)) or SLES ([sodium laureth sulfate](#)), EDTA ([ethylenediaminetetraacetic acid](#)), DEA ([diethanolamine](#)); No [SARA Title III, CA 65](#), or EPA priority pollutants; no materials listed by the ACGIH ([American Conference of Governmental Industrial Hygienists](#)) as hazardous; no animal testing; no animal ingredients

**Ingredients:** Soybean oil extract, surfactants from coconut and/or corn, xanthan gum, zeolite, low pH silicate, linear sulfonate, food-grade lime extract, less than 0.2 percent environmentally friendly polymer, natural volcanic perlite, filtered water

**Cleaning instructions:** Apply with sponge, soft brush, or directly on stain. Rub lightly, letting the microscrubbers do the work. Rinse with damp cloth and water.

**Smell:** Strong citrus scent

**Elbow grease required:** a little scrub'll do ya (per instructions on bottle)

**Resulting sparkle:** let's just call it "less dirty"

This orange creamsicle-esque bottle lists fewer actual ingredients than it does noningredients -- which is great, except that other products containing very simple ingredients out-cleaned it. The bottle said "let the microscrubbers do the work," and I just kept waiting ... but no apparent microscrubbing occurred, even after I did some macroscrubbing of my own. This guy was also the worst on the grout. But hey, it smelled yummy!

---

### **[Bon Ami Polishing Cleanser](#)**

14 oz. powder, \$1.29

**Eco-claims:** No chlorine, perfume, or dye; contains no phosphorus; biodegradable

**Ingredients:** Calcium carbonate

**Cleaning instructions:** Wet surface. Sprinkle on Bon Ami. Rub with wet sponge or cloth.

**Smell:** Slight flour-y scent, though hardly noticeable

**Elbow grease required:** scrub-a-dub and then some

**Resulting sparkle:** ooh! shiny

The holes at the top of this cylindrical container are grouped in the center, which made for messy pouring onto the sponge -- meaning I had to clean twice (once on the tile, and once on the floor where I spilled). The upside, though, is that this stuff has barely a scent and barely an ingredient -- so by default, there's no ooky stuff inside. It required some elbow grease, but did a pretty good job cleaning off the muck.

---

## **20 Mule Team Borax**

4 lbs. 12 oz. powder, \$4.49

**Eco-claims:** Does not contain phosphates or chlorine; safe for septic tanks

**Ingredients:** sodium tetraborate decahydrate (a chemical compound and mineral)

**Cleaning instructions:** Sprinkle on damp sponge or cloth and wipe.

**Smell:** Almost none -- a very slight soapy scent

**Elbow grease required:** a little scrub'll do ya

**Resulting sparkle:** blinding bling

Sign me up to be on Team Borax ... aside from the messiness of it being a powder and the big, heavy box, this product was amazing! I tested it because you readers recommended it, and I have to say -- y'all know what you're talking about. Using Borax, I was able to get the shower twice as clean in half the time -- almost no effort for a sparkling clean. I'm a convert! Next up: washing [those soiled t-shirts](#) in this stuff.

---

## **Ecover**

16 fl.oz. cream, \$2.69

**Eco-claims:** Plant-based ingredients, not based on petrochemical ingredients; no chemical residue; optimum level of biodegradability -- far exceeds legislative requirements; safe for all river and marine life; no animal testing; safe for septic tanks; recognized by the United Nations for outstanding practical achievements for the protection and improvement of the environment; Ecover's factory is built using a grass roof for insulation, wood beams from sustainable forest, and bricks made from coal mine waste

**Ingredients:** Plant-based, nonionic, tension-active surfactants, water, chalk powder, clay, natural gum, glycerine, and 100 percent biodegradable preservative

**Cleaning instructions:** Apply either directly to surface or onto wet sponge. Clean surface and then rinse off.

**Smell:** slight soapy scent

**Elbow grease required:** scrub-a-dub and then some

**Resulting sparkle:** bright

The not-quite-powder-not-quite-liquid cream consistency was less messy than either alternative, but I did end up using a lot of it. Because there was some grit in the cream, I was able to scrub off more grime than I thought with less work. Overall, this would be a good choice if you didn't want to mess with a powder.

---

## **Method Tub + Tile**

28 fl. oz. liquid, \$5.99

**Eco-claims:** Nontoxic and biodegradable; naturally derived; never tested on animals

**Ingredients:** Soap scum dissolver, nonionic surfactant, naturally derived solvents, essential oil fragrance

**Cleaning instructions:** Spray and wipe.

**Smell:** strong, lingering spruce-y, lemon scent (container says eucalyptus mint)

**Elbow grease required:** wipe on, wipe off (per instructions on bottle)

**Resulting sparkle:** a little scrub'll do ya

Because it's a spray, application on the vertical wall of tile was a bit messy as the liquid followed gravity's call. Per the bottle's instructions, this one didn't require much scrubbing -- but it also didn't do much to dent the deep-set dirt. Furthermore, the smell (while more clean-smelling than some) was a bit overpowering and definitely lingered long after I finished spraying.

---

### **Mrs. Meyer's Clean Day Surface Scrub**

11 oz. powder, \$5.99

**Eco-claims:** Chlorine and phosphate free; cruelty-free and not tested on animals

**Ingredients:** Calcium carbonate, oxygen bleach (natural cleaning activator), plant-derived surfactants, fragrance, and essential oils of geranium, rose, and clove

**Cleaning instructions:** Wet surface, sprinkle on powder and scrub; if facing a difficult stain, sprinkle powder on wet surface, lightly scrub, and let sit for a few minutes before final scrub.

**Smell:** strong flowery scent (container says geranium)

**Elbow grease required:** scrub-a-dub and then some

**Resulting sparkle:** ooh! shiny

I really liked the clever packaging on this one -- that is, until I tried to use it. Built like a powdered Parmesan cheese container, the lid required some swiveling and poking. I'm not sure if it's meant to be child-proof or just dummy-proof, but either way, I failed. It wasn't until my lovely assistant suggested I poke the top with a pen that I was able to get it open. And even then, the powder lingered on the cap after I poured it onto my sponge -- much like powdered Parm. For the amount of scrubbing (not much), there was good return sparkle-wise, but the scent -- pretty as a perfume, but overpowering for the bathroom -- was too much for me.

---

### **Seventh Generation Natural Tub & Tile Cleaner**

32 fl. oz liquid, \$4.69

**Eco-claims:** Nontoxic, biodegradable, no fumes; free of chlorine, petroleum based solvents, glycol ethers, phosphates, strong acids, caustics, and dyes; not tested on animals, no animal ingredients

**Ingredients:** Natural lactic acid (to remove soap scum and lime scale), coconut surfactants (for soil removal), whole and natural plant essences (a blend of emerald cypress, balsam fir, and lime essential oils), water

**Cleaning instructions:** Spray the area and wipe clean; for heavy soils, spray and allow to sit for one minute, scrub or wipe clean.

**Smell:** strong piney, lemony scent (container says emerald cypress & fir)

**Elbow grease required:** wipe-on, wipe-off

**Resulting sparkle:** let's just call it "less dirty"

It was nice to spray on this cleaner and leave it for a few minutes (though it dripped down the tile walls), then come back and have the grime in the grout wipe clean without much effort. This might also work in a shower stall that starts out fairly clean. But for this grimy floor, it couldn't do the trick - no matter how much I scrubbed.

---

**The bottom line:** Forget complicated ingredient lists, fancy spray bottles, and flowery fragrances. We suggest you join Team Borax and use the power of 20 mules to get bathroom surfaces sparkling for little effort and even less moola.