Ethical and green living
Ethical and green living with Lucy Siegle

The eco guide to cleaning products

Let's banish bleach – it really isn't a healthy way to clean the loo, and there are perfectly good green alternatives

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Sunday 24 September 2017 06.00 BST

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Tough job: someone's got to do it, but they don't have to use such harmful projects. Photograph: Teri Pengilley for the Guardian

It seems obvious that exposure to powerful cleaning products, including bleach, isn't ideal, but now there's powerful evidence of just how harmful they can be.

Using them just once a week could increase a person's chances of developing chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) by nearly a third, according to a recent 30-year study from Harvard University and the French National Institute of Health and Medical Research. This isn't the first time a link has been shown between serious health problems and everyday spray products. The culprit used to be phosphates, once the heroes of gleam, and omnipresent in laundry and dishwasher detergent. But in water, phosphates caused toxic bacteria growth. They were stopped, primarily by us – revolting consumers (in every sense).

But still we yearned for the sparkling cleanliness brought by phosphates, so they were reinstated – a pyrrhic victory if ever there was one. In 2015, the EU-mandated detergent directive finally removed them from our grasp. I bet few noticed.

So let's not cling on to bleach with the same desperation. Remember we already have a coterie of excellent ecological alternatives.

At the top of this tree is Ecover (the company also acquired Method in 2012), whose full range of products (including a bleach-free loo cleaner) makes use of plant-based ingredients (as opposed to oil-based) that are truly biodegradable.

I prefer to pay a few pence extra to those with a pioneering history in the R&D of ecological cleaning chemistry, as Ecover does. My money goes here rather than to ersatz supermarket own-brand "green" versions that carry a strong scent of greenwash.

The big picture: the Ugandan gold rush

All that glitters: Ugandan gold miners lead a hard life. Photograph: Ian Berry

Ian Berry's images portray the lives of artisanal gold miners trapped in an endless cycle of poverty in Busia, Uganda. Here they search in terrible conditions for tiny amounts of gold as a source of a few pence a day. Recently efforts have been made to bring Fairtrade certified gold to market. The first few symbolic grains will be presented during Berry's exhibition at Goldsmiths' Centre, London (until 27 October, fairlux.co.uk).

Well dressed: fabric inspired by coral reefs

Coral colours: Regenerating the Reef.

It's more than a decade since designer Deborah Milner collaborated with cosmetics brand Aveda to create her Ecoture collection. The project took inspiration from the belief that companies can profit without exploiting others. That collaboration was groundbreaking, showing the fledgling ethical fashion movement that sustainable design could also be beautiful and made with great precision. After many years spent running the bespoke McQueen Couture Studio, Milner now returns with Regenerating the Reef, her own couture collection, created by working with silk weavers in Sussex (aotextiles.com). Linking the collection to one of Milner's concerns, the destruction of coral reef, 10% of sales from the launch will go to fund work by MARfund.org to help to preserve the Mesoamerican Reef.

Regenerating the Reef: Contemporary fabrics by deborahmilner.net

Email Lucy at lucy.siegle@observer.co.uk or follow her on Twitter @lucysiegle

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FluffySatan 5h ago
Ecover has had its 'vegan' status taken away. Not so plant based now.
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fishguard 11h ago
my mother's used many eco varieties and says only ecover's toilet one works
where you actually need bleach, in hospital toilets (lots of serious and highly infectious germs there, busy crossbreeding, lots of vulnerable patients) it's banned: where you don't need it - most people's homes - it's tipped down by the gallon
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