

DID YOU KNOW? By 2014, you will not be able to buy washing detergent containing phosphates in any supermarket in Australia, and manufacturers will have stopped making the products. The same is true in the US and European Union.



PRODUCTS

What can I do at home?

Combat chemical damage by using natural, sustainable alternatives in your house, writes **Melinda Ham**.

Buying personal-care products such as shampoo, soap, laundry powder and liquid, plus cleaning products for your home or school, can sometimes be a detective game. Just because it is sold in a shop doesn't mean it is safe and will not harm you or the environment, the chief executive of Planet Ark, Paul Klymenko, says. You need to be an educated consumer and investigate what you are buying.

"Cigarettes are sold in a shop and they have been proven to cause cancer," Klymenko says. "Of course, they come with warnings but so do some cleaning products, especially things like oven-cleaning products, which say, 'Don't use in an enclosed space.' But if you are sticking your head inside the oven to clean it, how can it not be an enclosed space?"

The most important things to consider when buying personal-care and cleaning products is whether they will do the job required (such as clean your hair, the toilet or your clothes) and whether it could damage you or the planet in the process, Klymenko says. Here are some hints on what to look for.

PHOSPHATE-FREE

One of the detrimental ingredients in many washing powders and household cleaning products is phosphate. In the US in the late 1980s, the spread of blue-green algae across several waterways was linked to phosphates in cleaning products.

This led to a massive nationwide environmental campaign and by 1993, all the manufacturers of cleaning and washing powders began producing only phosphate-free products.

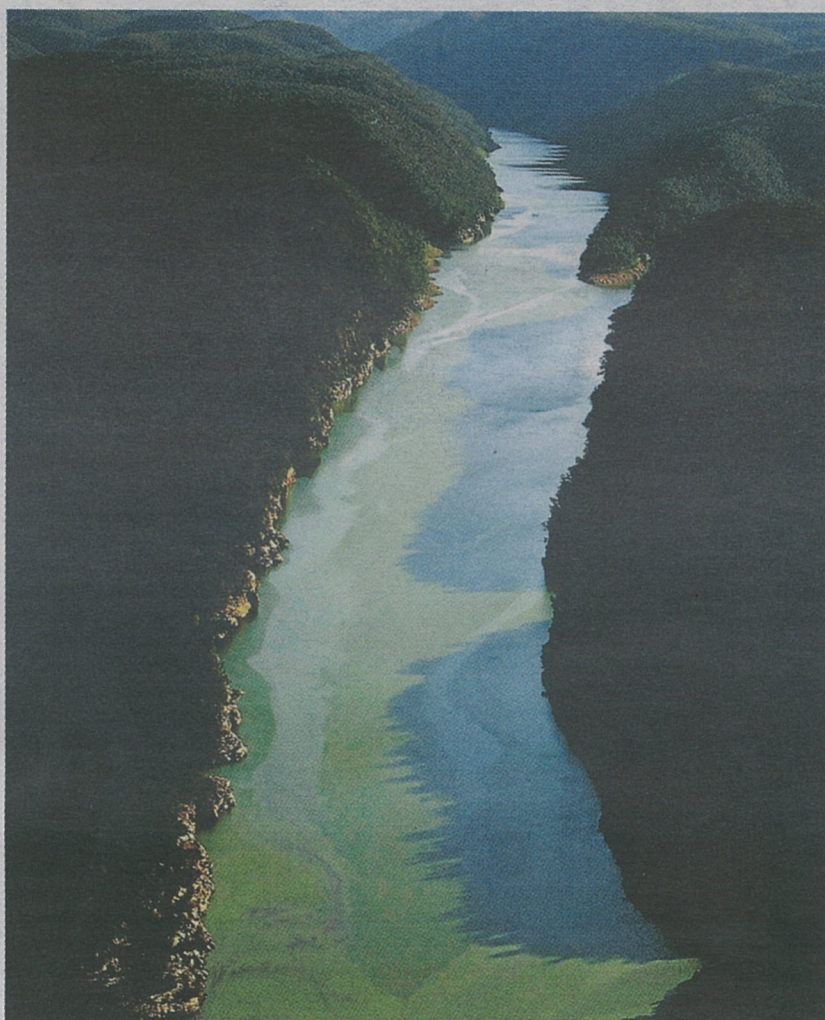
In Australia at the same time, in 1991, there was a 1000-kilometre bloom in the Barwon-Darling River. Thousands of fish and hundreds of cattle and sheep died. Agricultural run-off was blamed but phosphates from home products were also contributors.

Several conservation organisations tried anti-phosphate campaigns but it wasn't until October 2010 that the founder of the Do Something! environmental advocacy group, Jon Dee, got results.

"I had spent nearly 20 years taking the traditional route - lobbying politicians about the issue - but never got very far," says Dee, who was named Australian of the Year, NSW in 2010.

"I decided to focus on supermarkets. It was a positive approach because if they phased out phosphates, they became heroes and they got good press and they liked that."

Aldi was first in the limelight. In April last year, it announced it would phase out all phosphate detergents in its 250 supermarkets by the end of 2013, then Coles followed and Woolworths, too. Do Something! also met senior management at Unilever, which makes Omo - Australia's most popular laundry detergent - and persuaded it to stop using phosphates. Other manufacturers soon followed suit.



"Our global life-cycle research revealed that phosphate has a higher greenhouse-gas impact than other ingredients, so we've replaced it with lower greenhouse-gas alternatives," the chairman of Unilever, Sebastian Lazell, says.

So what can you do to help? "As phosphates are phased out over the next few years, a few detergents with phosphate in them will still be on the shelves, so it's up to you to read the label and don't buy them," Dee says.

NATURAL, ORGANIC, SUSTAINABLE AND CERTIFIED

So what steps should you take to discover whether other personal-care or cleaning products are safe? Klymenko says checking the label is the best way.

"Products have to list their ingredients, so if they are natural, easily recognisable things you have heard of, like orange oil or coconut or something like that, then you're probably OK," he says.

But natural products are not universally good if they don't come from a sustainable source, Klymenko adds. Palm oil is widely used in cosmetics, soaps and shampoos. Much of it comes from plantations in Indonesia and Malaysia, where rainforest trees have

Only natural ... (clockwise from above) blue-green algae in Warragamba Dam; lemon and vinegar are good cleaners.

Photo: Steven Siewert



been cut down and the habitats of endangered orangutans and other creatures destroyed. For a list of palm-oil-free personal-care products, see orangutans.com.au.

Another way to assess products is to choose those that have organic or sustainable ingredients, grown with care shown for the environment, Dee says. The main green-certification body is Good Environmental Choice Australia, a non-profit organisation that puts products through rigorous tests before it lets them wear its stamp. In the case of cleaning products, they must "either be environmentally innocuous or should readily biodegrade, and the products of degradation should not pose an increased risk to the environment". Check the organisation's website, geca.org.au. Also pick products with recycled and recyclable packaging.

If this all sounds like a bit too much hard work, remember that some of the best cleaners and shampoos are the old-fashioned products that your great-grandmother used: corn starch, lemon juice, baking powder and vinegar. They are all readily biodegradable - evidenced by the fact they can all be eaten.

Here's what they can do: Baking soda cleans, scours, deodorises any surface (including your hair) and softens water. Lemon is an effective weapon against most household bacteria.

White vinegar cuts grease, removes mildew, odours, some stains and wax build-up, and it makes hair shiny.

Corn starch cleans windows, polishes furniture and shampoos carpets and rugs.



FAST FACTS
When all Australian households eventually switch to phosphate-free detergent, it will equal 85,000 tonnes of CO₂ that's not going into the atmosphere, or taking 33,000 cars off the road every year.

CASE STUDY SCOTLAND ISLAND KINDERGARTEN

ENVIRONMENTALLY friendly personal-care or cleaning products, and even paint, are important in a school and kindergarten, and one kindy that's trying hard to create a green air and water environment is Scotland Island Kindergarten, a preschool for ages two to six in Pittwater, on Sydney's northern beaches.

This kindy has to be particularly careful about the products it uses because it is not hooked up to the city's mains water system. For washing and drinking water, staff use rainwater harvested off the roof into a tank, while everything flushed down the toilet or put down the sink goes into a septic system.

As a consequence, all dish-washing

detergent, hand soap, cleaning agents and disinfectants must be biodegradable. They are also plant-based and natural, the preschool's director, Liz Power, says, adding that the kindy has just gone even greener.

"We had the whole kindy painted using organic low-VOC paint so it had no fumes, even when it was drying," Power says.

VOC stands for volatile organic compounds. Many indoor paints are high in VOC, containing chemicals such as formaldehyde, which can irritate mucous membranes, cause ear, nose and throat and respiratory conditions and, in some cases, cause migraines.

Staff and parents have supported Power in



Sweet life ... teacher Jess Thompson makes watermelon cup cakes with (from left) Lillian Harrison-Britt, Benny Matthews and Will Duhid. Photo: Danielle Smith

her push for a greener school, including Jess Thompson, a teacher who takes the children for healthy-eating "cooking classes".

The kids don't cook on a stove but use organic, seasonal produce to make boats out

of capsicums or a Christmas tree from a pineapple and melon pieces.

"You don't have to be on an island and run off a septic system to create an eco-kindy like us," she says.