

DRY
CLEANING



Earth-Friendly Dry Cleaning

Lexington Cleaners
and



by Keith Waller

Green Choices

When we try to live a greener, Earth-sustainable lifestyle, we're faced with complex choices. Which lifestyle alternatives are better or best? For instance, should we choose locally grown natural fruit or organic fruit shipped by diesel truck from California? Or, should we support CO₂-friendly nuclear energy or stand firm on solar and wind energy? Are compact fluorescent lights the best choice for saving electricity or is the mercury they contain a new worry?

Baby steps taken are steps in the right direction. As new alternatives and improvements in technology become available, we should take advantage of them, even if we suspect that those greener alternatives aren't yet perfect.

For a long time, we've been bombarded with news, for instance that one food or another has newly discovered health benefits, only to learn later that the same food is also a health hazard. The confusion is frustrating, and perhaps the science behind these "discoveries" is flawed. Even pure water can be a deadly toxin if ingested in great enough quantities. Tests on rats with chemicals at improbable quantities lead to clues, not conclusions. When the dust storm of conflicting information clears, we are left to decide on our own. Unfortunately, choices about dry cleaning are no different.

Dry Cleaning Health Issues

The dry cleaning industry has been at the center of environmental health problems for years—and rightly so. Dry Cleaners began using turpentine, and later gasoline, before the risk of fire and explosion became a deterrent, and the less flammable Perchloroethylene (Perc) became the cleaning fluid of choice in the '50s. Perc was unregulated and routinely dumped, drained or ventilated in occupied neighborhoods without concern; an inconceivable notion today. "A lot of it was out of ignorance," explains Tom Garrett, owner of Lexington Cleaners. "This was 35 or 40 years ago. We didn't know we were doing anything wrong."

California recently enacted legislation to phase out Perc dry cleaning throughout its state, and New Jersey is close behind. It is expected that Perc will be outlawed across the nation in the future. Perc does not break down in the natural environment; and when it enters the soil and groundwater, it is an almost permanent contamination. The International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC) has designated Perc as a "probable human carcinogen."

Green Cleaning Options

Alternative dry cleaning methods have been appearing, such as wet cleaning, which uses water to clean clothes tagged "dry clean only." Experts say that 95 percent of dry-clean only clothes do well when washed gently in water and properly dried with tensioners and special dryers. "We use hand process wet cleaning when all else fails, along with a small machine that uses very light agitation. But you can't wash wool in water and not expect some shrinkage or have the water change the texture of the fibers. Water is actually a very harsh solvent," explains Garrett. "We haven't invested in the wet cleaning equipment to go that route."

Liquid CO₂ has been offered as a dry cleaning option, which uses industrial byproduct CO₂ that doesn't add to the Earth's CO₂ burden. "It's expensive," says Garrett. "I considered it with another franchise and almost bought five of those machines, but it has a lower cleaning ability and the machines operate at tremendous pressure. Water is actually better than CO₂ as a cleaning agent."

Some drycleaners claim to be cleaning "organically," using petroleum-based hydrocarbon solvents such as Exxon-Mobil's DF-2000 and Chevron Phillips' EcoSolv. Defining petro-

chemicals as organic is quite a stretch, likely due to the lack of definition regarding what can be legally called "organic." These questionably labeled organic cleaners are hydrocarbons and still release Volatile Organic Compounds (VOC) into the atmosphere.

An additional green cleaning method going by the trade name Green Earth uses liquid silicone, which, if released into the environment degrades fairly quickly into water, CO2 and trace amounts of silica, the basic form of



Green is a state of mind, and we're on our way there.

—Tom Garrett, owner, Lexington Cleaners

sand. As a cleaning agent, Green Earth preserves dyes, leaves clothes very soft and odor free and has a competitive cost. In the cleaning process, exposure to the liquid silicone is very slight, and the chemical breaks down to a non-toxic residue. However, in laboratory tests using extremely high concentrations, Dow Chemical Co. was able to cause uterine cancer in rats and reported those findings to the EPA. Dow defends the safety of liquid silicone based on its proper use, short environmental life and the fact that certain biological functions in rats do not relate to humans.

Converting to Green Operations

"We've been a Green Earth Dry Cleaner for five years and we have two machines," says Garrett. "We still have a Perc machine that we use sparingly when we have to. But in today's world, we're cleaning clean clothes. Quite often, airing out, pressing or steaming to refresh dry cleaned clothes is sufficient; and Lexington Cleaners does that when requested. Does it hurt your clothes to clean them too often?

"Cleaning helps them to last longer. It removes the grime and soil that cuts fibers. You're better off keeping your clothes clean," Garrett advises.

"Green Earth is silicone, which has been used in the makeup industry for years," explains Garrett. "It's the liquid part of deodorant, the smoothing vehicle for lipstick and other liquid makeup. It's been around a long time. And it's not a solvent, it's a solution that we add a detergent to for cleaning."

Banking on the long history silicone has had in health and body care, Garrett has placed his bet that Green Earth is the best alternative. "Eventually, we hope to be entirely Green Earth, and transition completely out of Perc," he adds.

Lexington Cleaners allows you to request specifically Green Earth cleaning or you can allow them

to use whatever method available to remove stains or renew an outfit to its best condition, drawing on the expertise of Lexington Cleaners staff of part chemists, part artists. Some staff were with Lexington Cleaners when Garrett bought the company in 1988, and they are still there and receiving training and education regularly. And, making the green switch may have been good for business. "In California, dry cleaning is down 30 percent, and to a lesser degree down in Columbia, too," shares Garrett. "We're not at our maximum, but we're



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still growing and we've been fortunate this past year. We started with two locations and now have 17, including our association with Piggly Wiggly, and we have home delivery as well."

Along with other innovators in environmentally friendly manufacturing and conservation, Garrett occasionally speaks with environmental groups about his industry and experience. Looking forward, he sees major changes in his industry toward green alternatives. "Perc will be phased out in all states eventually, like California, and as goes California, so goes the nation. I've been experimenting and moving in that direction, and Green Earth will be one of the leading ways to go. Many small town dry cleaners in South Carolina are still using Perc and the hydrocarbon alternatives—I'm surprised how many."

How does December look? "The holidays are our busy time," says Garrett. "It starts about now and goes through the end of the year and New Year's. But people don't dress up like they used to in tuxedos and formal gowns; they go casual."

For more info on Lexington Cleaners and its green plans, call Tom Garrett at (803) 359-3830, email Tom@LexingtonDryClean.com or visit LexingtonDryClean.com for locations. For information on Green Earth Cleaning, visit GreenEarth-Cleaning.com.