

You Don't Eat It ... You Clean With It

The trend of bio-based cleaning products being used as a green alternative to caustic cleaning chemicals is growing.

Author: Diane Mahana

Visiting the cleaning section of a major "health food" retailer, shoppers will likely see rows and rows of cleaning products made from corn, soybeans, coconuts, citrus and other agricultural products.



Many of these products, which are designed for the home market, were available more than 30 years ago.

However, in the past few years, something very interesting has been happening in the professional cleaning industry: More and

more of these agricultural-based products are finding their way onto the shelves of JanSan distributors and "big box" retailers.

Known as bio-based cleaning products, they are defined as "products composed in whole or in significant part of biological products or renewable domestic agricultural materials."

For our purposes, they are cleaning products that rely on plant materials as the primary active ingredient for cleaning.

This shift has a number of pluses for the professional cleaning industry, particularly now as the industry transfers from conventional cleaning to more environmentally preferable processes.

Offering a sustainable solution by using natural, renewable resources, bio-based products:

- Help reduce our country's dependence on imported oil
- Reduce our need to look and drill for oil in environmentally fragile areas of the world
- Provide a stable and growing market for local farmers
- Often have lower levels of volatile organic compounds (VOC), helping to protect health and indoor air quality.

Although their cleaning applications may vary, many of the products cleaning professionals use every day now have bio-based equivalents.

Among these are glass cleaners, general or all-purpose cleaners that can perform multiple cleaning tasks, bath and bowl cleaners and degreasers.

The Big Push

If bio-based products have been available for so many years for the home or consumer market, why the recent interest and popularity in the professional cleaning industry?

There are likely many reasons for the surge of intrigue regarding bio-based products.

First, the cleaning performance of these products has improved significantly, making them worthy of professional applications.

Additionally, as already referenced, they are usually more environmentally responsible because they are made from more "natural" and sustainable materials when compared to conventional cleaning products.

Taking this a step further, some have even been formulated in partnership with the [U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's](#) (EPA) [Design for the Environment](#) (DfE) formulation initiative.

But, the big push for bio-based cleaning chemicals most likely came when the federal government created the [BioPreferred](#) program in 2002, which was expanded considerably in 2008.

The BioPreferred Program

The BioPreferred program was part of the [2002 Farm Bill](#) and was expanded by the [Food, Conservation and Energy Act of 2008](#) to increase the purchase and use of bio-based products.

The BioPreferred program is managed by the [U.S. Department of Agriculture](#).

It designates certain items like cleaning products that are required for purchase by federal agencies.

The bio-based content of the product must be specified and information on the technical, health and environmental

characteristics of accepted products are posted on the BioPreferred website located at www.biopREFERRED.gov.

The goal of the program is to increase the purchase and use of renewable, environmentally responsible, bio-based products for use in federal facilities worldwide.

And, because the federal government is such a huge customer of cleaning products and services, JanSan manufacturers responded to meet this increased product demand.

Performance And Costs

It is clear that many bio-based products can and do have a number of economic and environmental benefits for our industry and country.

However, for cleaning professionals, the two paramount issues are: Do the products perform well and, if so, are they cost-effective?

One JanSan distributor addressed these concerns by stating that several years ago, "bio-based products were not cost-effective and they didn't work. [However,] in the last 10 years, [there] have been great strides. They work and they are cost-effective."

Along with the federal government's encouragement to use these products, educational facilities have shown the greatest interest in using bio-based cleaning products.

This is mostly because of the sustainability of bio-based products, which is a central component of reducing cleaning's impact on the environment.

However, cleaning professionals should do their homework when selecting bio-based cleaning chemicals because not all of them are certified as green and performance along with costs can vary.

Fortunately, selecting products that have been approved by and formulated in partnership with reputable green certification programs can make much of this homework considerably easier.

Diane Mahana is the marketing manager for [Pro-Link Inc.](#), a JanSan marketing and buying group for the professional cleaning industry.