**Why You Should Not Use Bleach to Clean Your Deck** **and Top-Rated Wood Deck Cleaners in 2020**

Many homeowners have used household bleach to clean their wood decks but cleaning a deck with household bleach is not an industry recommended best practice for a variety of reasons. This bulletin explains why bleach is not recommended and it provides suggestions for effective alternatives based on recent surveys of the most effective and top-rated wood cleaners.\*

The purpose of wood deck cleaners is to remove dirt, mold, algae and oxidation (graying). Several different brands and formulations of wood deck cleaners are available in the market place and they can be applied using a variety of methods e.g. spray, scrub or power wash.

Because most deck cleaners raise the pH in wood, it is important after using a cleaner to neutralize the pH. This is most commonly achieved using a deck brightener. This bulletin does not include surveys on deck brighteners, but may be included with other products surveyed at a future date,

Based on several wood cleaner surveys conducted in 2020 by various companies, we have listed 11 of their top-rated products below.

**Important: Why you should not use bleach**

* Household bleach (sodium hypochlorite) can potentially break down the *lignin* in wood causing excessive damage to wood cells. The natural pH of wood is slightly acidic, and bleach is a basic solution. As a result, use of bleach on wood shifts the pH from near neutral pH to a basic pH that will damage the cellular structure.
* Bleach corrodes metal fasteners, screws and nails
* Bleach can cause damage to surrounding plants.
* Bleach, after several months, lightens wood's natural color.
* Bleach does not eliminate the spores from which mold and mildew grow.

**Alternatives to Bleach**
**Hydrogen peroxide** is environmentally friendly and a safer substitute than bleach. Its chemical formulation is H2O2. As the oxidizing process releases the excess molecule of oxygen, H2O (water) remains as its residue. For tough jobs, hydrogen peroxide kills the mildew on contact within several minutes.

**Oxygen bleach** is **sodium percarbonate**, an environmentally friendly and excellent detergent and bleaching agent with a hydrogen peroxide base. Sodium percarbonate is a cleaning and bleaching agent with a strong fungicide effect. It has been tested and found to be more effective attacking the deeper-rooted organic growth on the porous wood surfaces.

Sodium percarbonate is a white particle powder, nontoxic with no contamination, nonflammable, non-explosive, and soluble in water. It is also biodegradable and leaves no harmful by-products or residues that can harm the environment. Sodium percarbonate is effective in cleaning most average wood preparation jobs.

Apply **oxalic or citralic acid**(deck brightener) after using sodium percarbonate or hydrogen peroxide in the cleaning process. The deck brightener will restore the wood to its natural pH and neutralize the sodium percarbonate cleaner. This will provide a beautiful finish when applying the final stain.

Citralic acid is a specifically formulated blend of **acids** and surfactant and was designed to neutralize and brighten quickly without unwanted bleaching or damage to the wood. This is the step professional restoration contractors use to achieve that like-new look of fresh cut wood.

**Top-rated wood cleaners tested or surveyed in 2020**



**1.  Simple Green - Oxy Solve Deck and Fence Pressure Washer Cleaner** – Biodegradable deck cleaner product using hydrogen peroxide as its active ingredient. Can be used with a pressure washer or manually. Able to remove tough grease and oils though it may take several applications. Rated #1 rated best for cleaning wood decks from <https://www.trees.com/best-deck-cleaners>.

**2.  Simple Green 18201** – no pressure washer needed. Rated “best overall deck cleaner” from [www.homecleaningforyou.com/best-deck-cleaners/](http://www.homecleaningforyou.com/best-deck-cleaners/) and rated #1 by <https://bestconsumerrating.com/best-deck-cleaner-consumer-reports/>.

**3.  Restore-A-Deck/Gemini Restore-A-Deck** – Cleaner and brightener in one kit; active ingredient is sodium carbonate peroxyhydrate. Rated #1/#2 (4.75 of 5 consumer star ratings and 9 of 10 by DeckStainHelp.com review) from <https://www.deckstainhelp.com/best-deck-cleaners/>.

**4.**  **Defy Wood Deck Cleaner**–Safe alternative to chlorine bleach-based cleaners; oxygen-based powder concentrate; can be used alone for cleaning or following a cleaner to brighten the decks. Easy to use and suitable for all types of wood. Rated #3 (4.3/5 consumer star rating and 8.5 of 10 by DeckStainHelp.com) from <https://www.deckstainhelp.com/best-deck-cleaners/>. Also, Defy Wood Brightener is recommended as a follow-up after using the Defy cleaner by <https://www.trees.com/best-deck-cleaners>.

**5.**  **EFC-38 Wood Cleaner** – Powder concentrate; clean and prep all exterior wood before applying a coating.  Rated 3.7 of 4 of consumer star ratings and 7 of 10 by DeckStainHelp.com, <https://www.deckstainhelp.com/best-deck-cleaners/>.

**6.  Woodrich Heavy-duty Wood and Deck Cleaner** – Affordable, excellent coverage; provides the strength necessary to strip most semi-transparent stains and sealers, dead grey wood, mold, mildew and heavy accumulations of grime; contains a sodium percarbonate but is not like a straight percarbonate cleaner. EFC-38 was designed to remove aged and failing oil-based wood finishes. Rated “best budget cleaner” from [www.homecleaningforyou.com/best-deck-cleaners/](http://www.homecleaningforyou.com/best-deck-cleaners/).  Also rated “best for wood decks” from [www.bobvila.com/articles/best-deck-cleaner.com/](http://www.bobvila.com/articles/best-deck-cleaner.com/) and #2 by [https://bestconsumerrating.com/best-deck-cleaner-consumer-reports/.](https://bestconsumerrating.com/best-deck-cleaner-consumer-reports/)

**7.** **Wet & Forget Moss, Mold, Mildew and Algae Cleaner 800003** – Great for high humidity areas; no bleach and phosphorous, removes mold and algae stains; no rinsing or scrubbing required. Rated “best biodegradable” from [www.homecleaningforyou.com/best-deck-cleaners/](http://www.homecleaningforyou.com/best-deck-cleaners/); and rated “best for mold and mildew” from [www.bobvila.com/articles/best-deck-cleaner.com/](http://www.bobvila.com/articles/best-deck-cleaner.com/) and by <https://bestconsumerrating.com/best-deck-cleaner-consumer-reports/>.

**8.  Spray Nine 26901S Deck Cleaner** – Multi-purpose, eliminates bacterial odors and suitable for carpet cleaning. Rated “best heavy duty” from <http://www.homecleaningforyou.com/best-deck-cleaners/>.

**9.**  **Spray and Forget SFiG-J Deck Cleaner** - economical, no rinsing required, non-corrosive; No bleach, phosphates, lye, or acid. Non-caustic, noncorrosive, and nonacidic. Eco-Friendly and biodegradable. Rated “best eco-friendly” from [www.homecleaningforyou.com/best-deck-cleaners/](http://www.homecleaningforyou.com/best-deck-cleaners/) and “best eco-friendly” [by https://bestconsumerrating.com/best-deck-cleaner-consumer-reports/](https://bestconsumerrating.com/best-deck-cleaner-consumer-reports/).

**10.** **Scotts Plus OxiClean Outdoor Deck Cleaner** – Fast-foaming action works great for cement, stone, vinyl, brick, safe to use around plants and fabrics, no chlorine bleach and phosphate. Rated “best spray” by <http://www.homecleaningforyou.com/best-deck-cleaners/> and by [https://bestconsumerrating.com/best-deck-cleaner-consumer-reports](https://bestconsumerrating.com/best-deck-cleaner-consumer-reports/)/.

**11.**  **SunJoe SPX-HDC1G Deck Cleaner** – Biodegradable and non-toxic, versatile and easy to use. Rated “best all purpose” from  [www.homecleaningforyou.com/best-deck-cleaners/](http://www.homecleaningforyou.com/best-deck-cleaners/) and rated best deck cleaning solution by [https://bestconsumerrating.com/best-deck-cleaner-consumer-reports](https://bestconsumerrating.com/best-deck-cleaner-consumer-reports/)/.

**Product recommendations based on the below 2020 surveys**

1. <https://www.trees.com/best-deck-cleaners>
2. <http://www.homecleaningforyou.com/best-deck-cleaners/>
3. <https://www.deckstainhelp.com/best-deck-cleaners/>
4. <https://www.bobvila.com/articles/best-deck-cleaner/>
5. <https://bestconsumerrating.com/best-deck-cleaner-consumer-reports/>

**Other resources**

1. <https://www.chicagotribune.com/news/ct-xpm-2001-07-21-0107210073-story.html>
2. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/where-we-live/wp/2018/04/30/bleach-for-brick-patios-and-siding/>
3. <https://www.askthebuilder.com/how-to-safely-clean-a-deck-or-patio/>
4. <https://www.britannica.com/science/oxalic-acid>
5. <https://www.deckstainhelp.com/using-bleach-to-clean-decks/>
6. <https://www.angieslist.com/articles/dont-clean-your-wood-deck-bleach.htm>

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