

As the recent heatwave gripped the UK, millions of us had but one thought: “Oooh, it’s a good drying day”.

And naturally we rushed indoors to measure, stir and mix our own chemical-free, organic, non bio washing detergent, ready for the daunting task of cleansing Bolognese sauce from school uniform.

As unlikely as it seems, it appears that thousands of us are doing just that in a move towards natural living.

But could a homemade concoction really be the Holy Grail of laundry cleanliness? Could it effectively combine the environmental benefits of producing less toxic waste AND do a decent job of cleaning?

In terms of scoring green Brownie points, DIY detergents are right up there. The aforementioned reduction in chemical laden waste water is just the start. Add to this the expulsion of additives and lack of sickly scents and even the most delicate of skins can feel the benefit. Gone too is the excessive amount of plastic thrown away as old bottles can be re-used to store each new batch of detergent.

Environmental accolades aside, there’s also the cost. You will quite probably save money if you use your own detergent. With relatively few ingredients to source, once you’ve stockpiled the staples you can keep on washing for much longer than using commercial products. Somewhat surprisingly, you really don’t need to use very much DIY detergent in each wash at all.

So what could possibly put you off donning your Marigolds for an afternoon of concoction creativity? Well, it’s a bit...messy. Not the end of the world of course but there is a bit of effort required in boiling, grating, pouring and generally acting like a mad scientist in your own kitchen. Top tip: the whole process can definitely be made much easier if you own a food processor with a grating attachment.

Scouring the internet churns up a fair few variations on detergent recipes but the core ingredients remain much the same: natural soap (bar form), Borax and/or washing soda. All these should be available from your local supermarket, though I did find tracking down Borax harder than I thought and opted to buy it online for around £5. For those a little nervous about using Borax (a natural mineral with a sinister name), it is quite possible to double up on washing soda instead. Experimentation is key.

With just these three ingredients alone, you’re all set but if you are in favour of sweeter smelling socks, it is entirely reasonable to add a few drops of essential oil or pick a nice smelling soap to grate in.

If you’re looking to boost your stain busting power, there is the option of adding white vinegar and lemon juice, both of which help cut through grease - the lemon also helps disguise the vinegar and stops your jeans smelling like takeaway chips.

Gold standard laundry enthusiasts could also consider adding powdered oxygen bleach. Known as sodium percarbonate, it’s 99% toxin free and used for brightening your whites. I found it on Amazon at around £10 for a 1kg bottle.

Stocked up? You’re ready to go. Search online for the variation that suits you best but use these recipes as your starting point:

Basic recipe for washing powder

One bar of natural soap, grated
250ml of washing soda
250ml of Borax

Mix together and add any extras you may have chosen, essential oil for example.
For this recipe you only really need to use one tablespoon for a normal load of washing, for slightly more heavy duty stains use another tablespoon. Can be used on a cold wash, as well as hot.

Basic recipe for washing liquid

One bar of natural soap, grated
250ml of washing soda
250ml of Borax

Get a large cooking pot and fill it half way up with boiling water. Add the grated soap and stir until dissolved, turn down the heat a little and add in the washing soda. It might get a bit bubbly at this point, then add the Borax.

Get as big a bucket as you can (a 20 litre bucket will get you about 80 loads and can be poured into smaller bottles) and half fill with hot water, then add your soap mixture. Top up with hot water, stir well and leave to cool. It should turn gloopy. Use about 250ml per wash.

The results

I have to confess a miniscule amount, alright a huge amount, of cynicism over the effectiveness of DIY detergents. I was much more interested in naming my new homemade product (Razzle Dazzle anyone?) then actually using it and felt sure I would have to carry out a follow up wash with a mug of Vanish thrown in.

I made both versions, powder and liquid and added to two loads of medium soiled whites. To be honest, the outcome was much the same, though with the liquid, you have the option of pre-treating tougher stains beforehand. I was far too cowardly to go all out cold wash, so opted instead for a 40 degree cycle. The easier stains were vanquished, the tougher ones (yes, the dreaded pasta sauce) were faded but not gone completely but as mentioned above, it's rare that commercial-bought products shift them completely either. I'd be interested to see if adding the sodium percarbonate had a better effect.

Despite my lack of faith, DIY-ing your laundry wash is fine. Actually, it's more than fine: it worked. At least as effectively as commercial products, none of which have ever successfully removed melted Digestive from a school t-shirt in my experience

And yes, of course there is the fact that a degree of elbow grease is needed and this might put the time short among us off the whole process. The secret, I think, is probably to choose the method that fits snugly into your lifestyle. For me, spending an evening hunched over a bucket, stirring like one of Macbeth's crones does not for one second appeal. But I can spend five minutes blitzing a bar of soap and throwing in some flakes. I may have to make the powder version more often than its gloopy counterpart, but I'll take that over crone-like stirring any day.

If we are to make a real impact in reducing our plastic waste and the amount of harmful chemicals we wear next to our skin, then this is an excellent and perfectly do-able start.