



Your Healthy Home: Cleaning Tips and Maintenance Tricks

Part II

Lisa Turner

In Part I we talked about getting your cleaning chores into your daily routine, so that you wouldn't have to take the time to clean separately. Sometimes, however, we have to schedule cleaning chores. Let's talk about making these simpler so you can finisher earlier and get back to what you want to do. There may be people out there who LIKE to clean - if you're lucky enough to have that built into your personality - you can come visit my house tomorrow.

A Progress reader brought up a wonderful point about last week's article. I am going to call this "SCF", or "Small Child Factor". When I was talking about what goes down your bathroom drain and how to get it out, of course I forgot to mention the "SCF". This factor is like living on another planet entirely - the things that you will find in drains - crayons, small toys, parts of stuffed animals, Lincoln Logs, Legos, paper clips, pen caps, toothpaste (yeah! lets empty the whole tube down the drain!), and other strange liquids and solids, etc. - you almost need to have a trap door under there. This applies even more so to toilets - since the bowls are child height and obviously put there for every child's amusement flushing whatever they can find down the bowl. The "SCF" adds complexity and interest to otherwise boring household mysteries.

Back to the bathroom. Take a look at your toilet. In addition to the normal cleaning routine, you should inspect the inside of the tank periodically. The parts that enable the toilet to flush are mostly plastic and they start to deform over time. If you use bleach in your toilet or chlorine tabs in your toilet tank, the plastic parts will deteriorate in half the time because of the caustic nature of bleach. I know that bleach gives our bathrooms that fresh clean smell, but remember what we said previously about bleach and your septic system? Bleach slows down the waste breakdown process by killing the very bacteria that make this process work. It's a tradeoff - use a friendlier cleaner, like soft scrub, or use a solution of baking soda with water, or with vinegar, for the bowl. Sprinkle baking soda around the rim and use your toilet brush. This will both clean

and deodorize your toilet. Then, if you really love that bleach smell, use a less concentrated bleach solution for the parts of the tank and bowl that won't be flushed into your septic tank.

Back to the parts inside the tank. Does your toilet "run", meaning, can you hear the sound of water continuing after the tank has filled? If so, the flapper could be hanging up, or the edges of the flapper might not be sealing. If you're handy, you can buy a kit at the hardware or home improvement store that will help you change out the tank flapper as well as the flush valve. Take a good look at what you have in the tank now so you can choose the right kit.

Now check the bowl itself. This is something I always do when I am inspecting plumbing on a job. Straddle the toilet bowl (face the tank) and GENTLY try to rock the bowl with your legs. Check for side to side movement and front to back movement. You can also kneel on the floor in front of the toilet and use your palms to see if there is movement. If it moves, then the bowl might not have been set properly, or the bolts holding it to the floor might be loose. About every 15th toilet I check is loose. If your toilet moves, try checking the bolts first. If the bowl moves front to back (rocks), you can put small pieces of plastic, or shims, under the areas that have the gaps. To make things look better and to secure the shims, you can then put a very small bead of caulk around the edges. Leave a couple of inches clear in the back in case your toilet starts leaking someday - you want to know about it. Use a small bead because getting a toilet base up from the floor for repair with a lot of caulking is difficult. Also be aware that a rocking toilet over time will ruin the wax seal - this is the seal between the floor plumbing and the toilet bowl flange - and if this seal fails - you guessed it - you will look up and see your ceiling dripping water or your crawlspace will suddenly be very moist.