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Professional cleaning with a green attitude

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Mia Gallina grew up in the Philippines, where her mother would clean the house with a mixture of vinegar, baking soda, lemons and olive oil.

"They don't have aisles and aisles of chemical products there," Ms. Gallina says. "Less is more, and that was even in a dusty and moldy country."

Ms. Gallina uses the homegrown recipes in houses and businesses all over the Washington area. She started an environmentally friendly cleaning service, the Green Mop, in 2003 and has more than 40 employees and about 800 clients.

As the green movement has swelled in the past few years, more scrutiny has been placed on the toxins in cleaning products, which can be potentially harmful for people breathing the fumes as well as for the air, water and soil.

The interest in a greener home has led to a plethora of commercially available cleaning products, even from mainstream lines such as Clorox.

So it would seem, well, natural, that if one is to hire a cleaning service, why not one that promotes a healthy environment?

"It is a huge market," Ms. Gallina says. She says her business saw a large increase after the 2006 release of the movie "An Inconvenient Truth."

"Before, people thought, 'You can't clean with that,'" she says, referring to natural household items. Her employees mix the cleaning solutions on-site and supplement with Seventh Generation products. "Mainly, people don't know how to clean this way," she says. "It really is just a personal stand for me."

Pernilla Alex has a similar philosophy as the owner of Mrs. Lavender, another green cleaning service in the area. Mrs. Lavender employees use vinegar, water and Ecover, a European brand of biodegradable cleaning products.

"For me, the products are not the big thing," Ms. Alex says. "The message is what makes us different."

For the owners of both green cleaning companies, the message includes using reusable rags instead of paper towels, using a high-tech vacuum filter,

planning routes to clients' homes so as not to waste gas, and paying employees a decent wage.

Geoff Livingston hired Mrs. Lavender to clean his home and the offices of his public relations firm, Livingston Communications, in Alexandria.

"It goes with the message of our company," he says. "We have an environmentally responsible office. We are chemical free, and we recycle. I don't think the green movement is a trend at all; I think it will stick around."

There are some detractors. Representatives of the \$17 billion cleaning-products market still have traditional products to sell, although more and more nontoxic ones are taking space on store shelves.

Steve Ashkin, executive director of the Green Cleaning Network, an advocacy group, also points out that there are no universal standards when it comes to hiring a green cleaning company.

More than 100 cleaning products, as well as some large cleaning companies, come with approval from Green Seal, a nonprofit environmental group. Smaller companies, however, rarely go through the certification process, Mr. Ashkin says.

He says people interested in hiring a green housecleaning service should ask how the service is different from a traditional one, what kind of vacuum cleaner is being used and what products are being used. Mr. Ashkin also says he prefers nontoxic commercial products rather than homemade solutions.

"Just because it is made from homemade ingredients doesn't mean it is good for the environment," he says. "Some of those cleaning recipes are old wives' tales."