

Bench Tests Put Marine Cleaners Through Their Paces

Practical Sailor testers rated the ability of each cleaner to tackle dirt and grime, grease, oil, and mildew stains on fiberglass, vinyl, rubber, and Formica. Testers used a fiberglass panel (18 inches x 44 inches) from the deck of a boat as a testing platform. Because the panel was the same one used for the degreaser test, testers de-waxed the surface with an MEK solvent before sectioning it off for the multi-purpose cleaner test. Testers rubbed dirt and sand on each section, then added outboard engine grease riddled with pieces of corroded aluminum. We used a foam paint brush to smear on used engine oil, and left them outside for several days with the hope they would breed mildew.

PS used a similarly sized sheet of Formica to test the cleaners against the same type stains on the surface, which is sometimes found in galley countertops. A completely filthy, yellow compressed-air hose coated with grime served as the platform for the rubber cleaning test; the sectioned-off hose turned out to be the toughest surface the cleaners faced. For the vinyl test, PS used a 12-year-old white boat seat cushion and backrest stained with mildew. Testers sectioned them off and then dirtied them further with engine grease, oil, and dirt.

Beyond testing each product on multiple surfaces and multiple stains, PS also measured each cleaner's pH balance and chlorine levels, using color-changing indicator strips like those found in the kits used to check the water in swimming pools. The color the strips took after being dipped in the cleaners correlate to a numerical figure that is the liquid's pH level. (See results in the Value Guide on page 14.) These figures tell testers how acidic each cleaner is. When comparing equally effective products, one with a balanced pH is preferable since it is less likely to harm the surface it is cleaning. None of the cleaners tested positive for chlorine.

To further determine whether the cleaners would be safe to use on a waxed hull, testers cleaned a fiberglass panel with MEK and Daniel-San waxed on one coat of wax (West Marine Pure Oceans with PTEF). We sprayed water on the panel to be sure the entire thing beaded water and was evenly waxed before applying the test cleaners. After cleaning with the test products, testers again sprayed the panel with water and noted any differences in the water-beading ability.

Although the test products are labeled as multi-surface cleaners, they are not safe for all surfaces. A table on page 28 lists the surfaces each test product claims to safely clean, according to the makers.

In the end, all of the test performances and price were weighed as testers chose the top performer, a Budget Buy, and a top "green product."

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 The test cleaners faced a series of bench tests, including (1) pH and chlorine level testing and cleaning tests on (2) grease-covered vinyl boat cushions and (3) grime-smearred fiberglass panels.

