

Dry-cleaning alternatives

Linden Cleaners in Darien, Conn., is trying something new, as are hundreds of other professional cleaners throughout the country. Environmental concerns and the telltale odor of the standard solvent, perchloroethylene (or perc), have opened the door to three new methods of dry cleaning. They are: GreenEarth, a silicone-based solvent used in modified dry-cleaning machines; liquid carbon dioxide (CO₂) used in high-pressure cleaning machines; and "wet cleaning" with plain water in computer-controlled washing machines.

In southern California, air-quality officials voted in December to phase out the use of perc by 2020. The first step requires that all newly installed cleaning machines use non-perc technology.

Using identical sets of garments, we compared the new cleaning methods to conventional cleaning with perc. The CO₂ and silicone-based processes performed as well as or better than conventional dry cleaning, for about the same price. Wet cleaning was less impressive.

Moreover, wet cleaning is not covered by textile-care-labeling regulations. So if your garment is labeled "dry-clean," you opt to have it wet cleaned, and the garment is damaged, the clothing manufacturer likely would not be liable.

THE GREAT CLEANING CHALLENGE

We challenged cleaners with difficult textiles: a lambswool jacket, a fuchsia silk blouse, and a rayon/linen blend skirt with pleats. Lambswool has short fuzzy fibers that are inclined to pill. Silks often bleed and fade. Rayon and linen are prone to shrinking, and pleats are easily undone. All are labeled "dry clean."

For the CO₂ cleaning, we went to Hangers stores in California, Nebraska, and Texas. For the silicone-solvent cleaning, we used two cleaners in Connecticut and one in suburban New York. Three independent cleaners in New York performed the wet cleaning, and a New York dry cleaner did the perc cleaning.

Each set of garments was sent to the same cleaner three different times to test the cumulative effect. We rumbled the clothing before sending it out, but we did not apply stains. Stain removal is based largely on the specific stain remover used and the skill of the shop's "spotter," rather than on the cleaning method used. Here's what our tests revealed:

Carbon dioxide. This method gave the best results, even better than conventional dry cleaning. The clothing didn't change shape, shrink, or stretch. There was little or no change in the color or the texture of the fabrics; only one silk shirt faded slightly after the third cleaning.

The web site www.hangersdrycleaners.com gives locations and phone numbers of cleaners who use this method.

Silicone-based. Marketed as GreenEarth cleaning, this method was almost as good. All three cleaners did a good job on the blouse. Two of the three skirts came out well, although pleats were not pressed as tidily as they could have been. One skirt shrank slightly. All three jackets showed moderate to severe pilling.

Cleaners who offer silicone-solvent cleaning are on the web site www.greenearthcleaning.com.

Wet-cleaning. This method left the lambswool jacket severely pilled in all three cases. Two jackets looked as though they had not been pressed. One shrank. The sizing was removed from one skirt, so it looked limp. Another skirt shrank from a size 14 to about a size 10. The silk blouses took to water fairly well: Only one showed slight fading.

Perchloroethylene. These results surprised us, considering that perc is so widely used. The lambswool jacket was severely pilled. The skirt shrank almost one size. The silk blouse faded and had a white, frosted look. This is the only method that resulted in an odor being left on the clothes. (We suggest airing perc-cleaned clothing before wearing.)

WHAT YOU CAN DO

If a nearby cleaners offers CO₂ or silicone cleaning, consider trying them. Wet cleaning should be used only for clothing you would consider hand washing. Consult your cleaners about appropriate cleaning methods for your garments.

To cut down on your trips to the cleaners:

- ▶ Hang up clothes immediately after you've worn them, give them a day off between wearings, and air them out before returning them to the closet. Use a clothes brush occasionally to remove surface dust.
- ▶ Treat spills quickly to prevent staining. And don't iron stained garments; heat sets stains.
- ▶ To spiff up a suit, steam it. *Febreze* or a similar product can help remove odors.