Domestic uses for vinegar

Like salt, vinegar has many uses beyond sprinkling it on your food. White vinegar is a valuable helping hand in the laundry. Underarm perspiration marks can be eliminated by a pre-wash soak in vinegar. Grubby collars and cuffs benefit from a rubbing with a paste of baking soda and vinegar before washing. Vinegar can be used in place of fabric conditioner to soften clothes – but of course, it won’t have the attractive perfumes of the commercial products. A soak in vinegar will remove stains caused by grass, coffee, tea and fruit. Adding vinegar during the rinse cycle, when washing terry nappies, has been held to help prevent nappy rash. Vinegar in the final rinse will remove the smell of any bleach you may have used. A half and half mix of vinegar and water in a spray bottle can be spritzed over clothes during ironing to give a crisp garment and help to reduce shiny areas. A grease spot on suede can be removed using a gentle rub with an old toothbrush dipped in vinegar.

In the garden, a few drops sprinkled onto a slug will get rid of it. Vinegar poured across door and window openings will prevent ants from crossing. If your lawn has developed brown patches where your dog relieves itself, a tablespoon of vinegar in its drinking water each day will solve the problem. White vinegar can be poured onto weeds growing on paths and patios. It will kill the tops off and they will not reappear for several months. Vinegar poured around a child’s sandpit every couple of months will stop cats using it as a toilet. Acid-loving plants such as rhododendrons, heathers and azaleas will benefit from a watering with half a pint of vinegar to a gallon of water. But, in all instances of vinegar use in the garden, you should ensure that it doesn’t splash onto any precious plants.

The house can profit in many ways from the use of vinegar. Most of us will know of its use in window cleaning. Wash the glass with a solution of 2 tablespoons of vinegar to half a gallon of water and use a dry newspaper instead of a cloth to polish for sparkling windows. Drains suffering from a build-up of fats or soap residues can be treated by pouring 2oz of bicarbonate of soda and a quarter pint of vinegar in and then covering the drain while the chemical reaction causes a fizz. Complete the treatment with a bucketful of very hot water. To remove rust from the likes of bolts screws, nails or small hinges, soak them in a sealed container of vinegar overnight.

Vinegar has long been recognised as a cleaning and sanitising agent, effective against a wide range of bacteria, yeasts and moulds – destroying them or reducing them to an acceptable level. Commercially, it is used to reduce micro-organisms in slaughterhouses and poultry sheds, to clean milking equipment and to wash and rinse walls and ceilings in restaurants and food shops. In the kitchen, an equal mixture of salt and white vinegar will remove tea and coffee stains on china cups. If you use one of those harsh, commercial oven-cleaning products, a final rinse of the oven walls with vinegar poured directly onto a sponge will prevent that horrible smell next time you switch it on. To clean the interior of a microwave, put a couple of tablespoons of vinegar and a cupful of water into a small bowl, place inside the oven and heat for 45-60 seconds. This will soften any burnt-on splashes which can easily be wiped away. Vinegar is an excellent grease-cutter and, mixed with water, can be boiled in a fryer for a cost-effective and safe clean. It is also an excellent odour remover. Mix together a teaspoon of bicarb with a tablespoon of vinegar and a pint of water. After the fizzing stops this can be put into a spray bottle and used as an air freshener. Alternatively, to get rid of paint fumes after redecorating, a small bowl of white vinegar will absorb the odour. A little white vinegar rubbed on your fingers before and after slicing onions will remove the smell more quickly.

All cookbooks, from the earliest, written in 1375 by Guillaume Tirel, chef to Charles V of France, have found a place for vinegar. But to introduce a note of caution, any cooking with vinegar should be done in pans of stainless steel, glass or enamel as it can cause damage to aluminium, iron or copper vessels. Meat can be tenderised by marinating it in a mixture of stock and vinegar. Add white vinegar to the water in which you boil eggs and it will help to prevent the shells cracking or, if they do – it will stop the escaping white from spreading. A quarter teaspoon of white vinegar to three egg whites will produce fluffier meringue. The descaling of fish is made easier if you rub the creature with vinegar five minutes beforehand. A few drops of vinegar added to pasta boiling in the pan, will cut the starch and make the pasta less sticky. It works for rice too. If your recipe calls for sour milk or buttermilk and you have none to hand, a little vinegar added to ordinary milk should make a good substitute.

Vinegar has its place in health and personal care. Cider vinegar, in particular, contains many nutritious components including phosphorous, potassium, sodium, magnesium, calcium, sulphur, iron, fluorine, silicon and many other trace elements. It contributes to healthy blood circulation; helps to break down fatty, mucous or phlegm deposits in the body; promotes digestion and supports renal health through neutralising excessively alkaline urine. Vinegar is also a natural antiseptic and can be used to treat a number of minor ailments. Diluted vinegar is useful in cleaning cuts and abrasions or reducing the itch from insect bites or jellyfish stings. A water and vinegar mix can be sprayed onto sunburn for a soothing effect. If age spots are your bugbear, treating them with a mix of equal parts of onion juice and vinegar, rubbed on daily, will see results in a few weeks. A glass of water containing two teaspoons of cider vinegar and two teaspoons of honey can be drunk three times a day to help dissolve the uric acid crystals in the joints that cause arthritic pain. Feet suffering from athletes’ foot can be soaked in vinegar and water for three evenings in a row to change the skin’s pH meaning that the fungus cannot grow. Moreover, half a cup of vinegar in a bowl of warm water will soften your feet prior to a pedicure. A Scottish tradition uses a vinegar soaked cloth on the forehead as a cure for hangover headaches. A couple of spoonsful of vinegar will repel insects as it makes your perspiration unpleasant to them. To whiten your teeth, try a weekly brush with a toothbrush dipped in white vinegar. This will also help with bad breath problems, but remember that acid on the teeth for any prolonged length of time is bad news and always rinse your mouth with plain water afterwards. And these are only some of the medicinal benefits claimed for vinegar!

There is also a place for vinegar in pet care. Vinegar added to the drinking water of cats and dogs will help to put fleas off the idea of setting up home on them. Starting with just a few drops so they get used to the taste, you can build up to a teaspoon for smaller animals or a tablespoon for the largest dogs. An alternative is to dip your pet into a bath of cider vinegar mixed with water – particularly useful if fleas threaten a puppy too young for commercial treatments. Just ensure that no vinegar gets into the pet’s eyes. Apparently a tablespoon of white vinegar added to the water of a reluctant doe rabbit will get her in the mood within a day. And I thought the problem with rabbits was to stop them breeding! Chickens also benefit from vinegar in their water, it keeps them laying longer into the winter and stops them pecking each other. If your fish tank has those unsightly mineral deposits near the top, they can be wiped away with neat vinegar on a paper towel and the good news that any residual vinegar is harmless to the fish. A 1:10 solution of white vinegar to water, sprayed onto your dog or horse will result in a glossy coat, much more cheaply than expensive commercial coat conditioners. And finally, if your cat’s litter box has that pungent ammonia smell, rinse it and pour about half an inch of cheap white vinegar into the bottom and let it stand for about twenty minutes before rinsing with fresh water and drying. The vinegar will neutralise the smell.

Vinegar is a good thing to have handy if you are doing some home redecorating. Dirt and grime can easily be removed from woodwork without dulling the finish by mixing ammonia, distilled vinegar and bicarb dissolved in warm water – but be careful of the smell when using it. If your paintbrushes have gone hard they can be soaked in hot vinegar, and then washed in warm, soapy water to soften them. To prevent plaster from drying too quickly when you are patching or filling, add a tablespoon of vinegar to the water when mixing to slow down the rate of drying (I suspect this tip is probably a little outdated in an age when most of us buy ready-mixed plaster!) When stripping wallpaper, dilute half a pint of white vinegar in four pints of water and apply generously with a sponge. Once an edge or corner starts to lift, start working the liquid behind the paper to break down the adhesive. Rinse the sponge frequently and change the vinegar-water when it cools or becomes murky. If preparing metalwork for painting, wipe down the cleaned surfaces with a 1:5 vinegar solution which will reduce peeling of the finished paint layer.

And finally, let’s look at a few miscellaneous uses. Your glass-lensed specs will be clean and streak-free if wiped with water with an added splash of vinegar. Apparently rum does the same job – but vinegar is definitely cheaper! If your shoes have those white stains caused by winter salt, you can wipe them away with a solution of a tablespoon of vinegar in half a pint of water. If your cut flowers don’t come with one of those little sachets of flower food, you can substitute the addition of two tablespoons of vinegar and one tablespoon of sugar to each quart of water. Remove those pesky stickers by laying a vinegar-soaked cloth over them until the vinegar soaks in, then they should peel off easily. The patent leather of your dancing pumps will shine better if wiped with a soft cloth which has been moistened with distilled vinegar.