



The Dirt on Teak Cleaners

Nine products made the teak cleaners test roster, including one gel (Star Brite Teak Cleaner Restorer), one paste (Captain John's Boat Brite), and one powder (Iosso Teak Cleaner). Three required mixing with water (MaryKate Nu-Teak, Dalys SeaFin, and the Iosso).

They all work, but which one is the fastest? The least harsh?

Nothing tugs a sailor's heart strings quite like a boat loaded with beautiful, golden-hued teak—especially when it's someone else's boat. Maintaining a boat's wood finish is a love/hate affair for most owners, but fortunately it is something that teak lends itself to easily. You can clean and oil or varnish it, or take the more laid-back approach, and let it weather to its natural, silver-gray color.

Regardless of a boat owner's maintenance philosophy, most teak will eventually need a thorough cleaning—be it in preparation for fall layup, spring commissioning, or when readying the wood for oiling or varnishing. For regular washing of teak decks, we recommend using a soft-bristled brush or scrubbing pad and a mild detergent—or none at all—scrubbing across the grain of the wood, rather than with it (to avoid removal of the softer wood). But for less frequent, more intense cleanings, or for areas being prepped for a wood finish, a teak cleaner can be the solution. There's no shortage of teak cleaners available, but which one

to use? From one-steps to two-steps, pastes, powders, and gels, *Practical Sailor* scanned the market to find the most effective teak cleaner available.

WHAT WE TESTED

To narrow the field, we divided the products into two categories: stand-alone cleaners and cleaning duos (two separate products applied one after the other, often a cleaner and brightener). This evaluation covers the solo cleaners; the twosomes will be reviewed in a future *PS* issue.

CAPTAIN JOHN'S BOAT BRITE

Captain John's Boat Brite Teak Cleaner is billed as a 100-percent non-toxic, phosphate-free, biodegradable way to deep clean teak while restoring its natural beauty. Made by the New York-based Brite Group, the paste was the only product tested that advertises being compliant with the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's National Clean Marina and Clean Boating guidelines. Its formula includes sodium cocoate (a derivative of coconut oil), emulsifiers, and water. It

was noticeably less harsh than other products tested and actually had a light, pleasant smell.

Captain John directs users to apply the cleaner with a soft-bristle brush and leave it on for several minutes to allow for the deep cleaning of imbedded dirt. *PS* testers let the product sit for about 7 minutes before rinsing with fresh water.

One issue testers had with this product was its small, tub-style container. When cleaning larger areas, you have to transfer the product from the 12-ounce tub to a deckbrush or the deck. Captain John reported that the cleaner will be available in larger containers later this year.

As with most "green" products these days, being eco-friendly comes with a price: At \$20 for a 12-ounce tub, Captain John's was the most expensive cleaner tested. But in this case, being gentle on nature also means being gentle to your teak.

Bottom Line: Boat Brite cleaned its test panel well, and its nontoxic nature means no worries about it damaging adjacent surfaces.

A Checkered Path

Each teak cleaner was tested on a section of weathered teak decking aboard our test boat, a 1978 Union 36. The boat's deck, which is exposed year-round, was recaulked and sanded in May 2006 and was last cleaned using a deck brush and fresh water six months prior to our test.

Testers applied each product following manufacturers' instructions. For ratings, testers considered each product's performance, harshness, ease of application, and price.

Because some of these products are rather harsh, proper protective clothing and eyewear are a must. We recommend wearing long sleeves, gloves, and glasses.

The first thing that became apparent while comparing the results of our test is that all of the products worked—each cleaned its assigned section of teak decking well. There were slight variations (Interlux and West Marine left the teak noticeably lighter in color for example, due to their added brightening properties), however all of them removed dirt and grime from the deck, leaving a nice, clean surface.

Once we determined that a ranking based solely on cleaning ability wouldn't work, testers decided to focus on other factors such as ease of application, chemical harshness, dwell time, environmental concerns, etc. For example, products that must be mixed require more preparation and time (however slight) than one that can be applied directly from the container. The same is true for a cleaner that requires a 10-minute dwell time versus one that a user can put on and take off immediately. On the flip side, many boaters may be perfectly content to wait that 10 minutes if the cleaner is more mild (meaning no worries about splashing it on adjacent gelcoat or painted surfaces), more gentle on the wood, cheaper, or more environmentally friendly. Also, having a concentrated formula like the Iosso means more washes per container—more clean for your buck.

So rather than choosing a Best Choice among teak cleaners, testers opted to recommend a few based on specific characteristics: the most economic (Budget Buy), the most eco-friendly, easiest to apply, etc.



We sectioned off the deck of a Union 36, turning it into a teak checkerboard. The after-most test patch was cleaned with Star brite Teak Cleaner, followed by an area cleaned with Interlux Premium Teak Restorer.

DALYS SEAFIN TEAK CLEANER

Dalys is a family-owned, Seattle-based manufacturer of wood finishing products. Dalys SeaFin Teak Cleaner is advertised as a one-step cleaner for restoring weathered teak prior to applying a new finish (such as oil or varnish). Active ingredients include sodium salt of benzyisulfonic acid and sodium meta silicate.

This cleaner is concentrated and must be mixed with water prior to use. While the mixing adds a step, it also means you get more applications from a single container. Product labeling calls for a ratio of 1:2, cleaner to water, and a dwell time of 3 to 5 minutes. Adjacent surfaces (anything other than wood) must be rinsed immediately to avoid damage if they come in contact with the cleaner.

Dalys also offers its SeaFin Teak Oil, which will be reviewed in our upcoming report on teak oils.

Bottom Line: The SeaFin teak

cleaner performed well with minimal dwell time and moderate scrubbing. That being said, it had one of the more potent chemical odors of all products tested.

INTERLUX PREMIUM

Interlux Yacht Finishes is a leading supplier of high-performance marine coatings. Its Interlux Premium Teak Restorer is advertised as an environmentally friendly, water-based formula that safely cleans and brightens teak in one step. The liquid's active ingredients include citric acid and oxalic acid, a relatively potent organic acid. This gives it a slightly strong, but not unpleasant smell.

It calls for no heavy rinsing after application, and as far as testers could tell, it lived up to its claim that it would not bleach, damage, or raise wood grain. It also claims to be safe to use around fiberglass, wood, metal, and painted or varnished surfaces.

While we didn't test it on metal, we saw no sign of any damage to the fiberglass and wood near our test patch. This is a big plus as cleaner invariably finds its way onto adjacent surfaces.

The Interlux does have a seven-minute dwell time, one of the longest in the test. For follow-up protection on decks, Interlux suggests its Premium Teak Oil. (Stay tuned to find out how well it performed in our upcoming report on teak oils.)

Bottom Line: Interlux Premium Teak Restorer worked well, and its inclusion of wood brightener saves a step for those planning to use a wood brightener anyway. Cons include the use of harsher chemicals and a comparatively long dwell time.

IOSSO TEAK CLEANER

Iosso has been manufacturing environmentally responsible cleaning products for over 25 years. Its teak

MAKER	PRODUCT	SIZE	PRICE/ PRICE PER OUNCE*/ PRICE SOURCE	SURFACE USES	'GREEN' RATING**	EASE OF APPLICATION
Brite Group ✓	Captain John's Boat Brite Teak Cleaner	12 oz.	\$20 / \$1.67 westmarine.com	Horizontal and vertical	Excellent	Good
Dalys	SeaFin Teak Cleaner	32 oz.	\$10 / 16¢ (diluted 2:1) dalyspaint.com	Horizontal	Fair	Fair
Interlux ✓	Premium Teak Restorer	16.9 oz.	\$9 / 53¢ defender.com	Horizontal	Good	Excellent
Iosso \$	Iosso Teak Cleaner	16 oz. (4 gal.)	\$14 / 3¢ iosso.com	Horizontal	Good	Good
MaryKate	Nu-Teak One-Step Teak Cleaner & Brightener	32 oz.	\$12 / 7¢ (diluted 5:1) jamestowndistributors.com	Horizontal	Fair	Fair
MDR Amazon	One-Step Teak Cleaner	32 oz.	\$13 / 41¢, pleasure boatmarine.com	Horizontal	Fair	Good
Star brite ✓	Gel Teak Cleaner Restorer	32 oz.	\$11 / 34¢, discount marinesupplies.com	Horizontal and vertical	Good	Excellent
Star brite	Premium Teak Cleaner	32 oz.	\$14 / 43¢, discount marinesupplies.com	Horizontal	Fair	Fair
West Marine	One-Step Teak Cleaner & Brightener	32 oz.	\$11 / 34¢ westmarine.com	Horizontal	Fair	Fair

\$ Budget Buy ✓ Recommended *Price per ounce figured with suggested dilution. **Based on info provided.

cleaner comes as a powder (a 16-ounce jar makes 4 gallons of cleaner) and claims to safely remove dirt, black algae, and mildew stains without harsh chemicals.

We're not sure what Iosso uses in lieu of "harsh chemicals," as it simply lists the ingredients as "Trade Secret." According to Iosso, the cleaner emits no harmful vapors, is biodegradable, non-toxic, and won't harm fabric, metal, fiberglass, or plastic surfaces. It had essentially no smell and appeared fairly benign from a "harshness" standpoint.

To activate the powder, mix it with warm water—1 scoop makes a quart, 4 scoops a gallon. It calls for a dwell time of at least 10 minutes.

It claims it can be used on both horizontal and vertical surfaces, but the soupy mix is really no better for vertical surfaces than liquids.

At \$14, a 16-ounce container generates 4 gallons of cleaner, making it the most economical cleaner tested.

Bottom Line: Despite its inherent gentleness, the Iosso cleaned the weathered teak as well as those cleaners with more harsh formulas. It took a long time to do it, but required minimal scrubbing. Iosso gets the nod for Budget Buy.

MARYKATE NU-TEAK

CRC Industries, maker of MaryKate products, is a worldwide leader in specialty chemicals for the marine and other markets.

MaryKate's Nu-Teak One-step Teak Cleaner, an alkaline cleaner, claims to remove dirt stains, oxidation, and weathering from teak and other unfinished wood. Nu-Teak was one of the more harsh-smelling products we tested. Company literature says that

the amount of cleaning solution each bottle can produce.

Bottom Line: Nu-Teak's no dwell time is a plus, and testers liked being able to control the cleaner's potency by diluting it.

MDR AMAZON ONE-STEP

Marine Development & Research Corp. (MDR) offers more than 100 boating products. In 1995, MDR purchased Amazon, which constitutes the bulk of its teak-care line.

MDR Amazon's One-Step Teak Cleaner is billed as an acid-free liquid that won't harm fiberglass or damage the teak's soft grain. With the active ingredient ethylene glycol monobutyl ether, it claims to remove rust stains, fish blood, and other grime. For really dirty teak, MDR recommends its two-part product.

To apply the one-step, wet the area with fresh or salt water, then scrub, rinse, and repeat if necessary. Amazon's suggested followup is its Teak Prep and teak oil.

Bottom Line: Amazon's One-step worked well and with minimal scrubbing. No dwell time means you can start (and finish) cleaning faster, and the option of using fresh or salt water is a plus.

STAR BRITE GEL

From its automotive-industry roots, the Alabama-based Star brite now

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Some fans of the au-naturel teak look say scrubbing the deck with salt or fresh water is bath enough and is less damaging than using teak cleaners or soaps. Compare the section of our test boat that was scrubbed with fresh water only (below left) and another that was cleaned with the Star brite gel.



makes numerous boat maintenance products. Its Star brite Gel Formula Teak Cleaner Restorer is touted as an environmentally safe, biodegradable cleaner with no acid or harsh chemicals, so it will not raise wood grain. The citrus-based cleaner has no noticeable chemical smell.

The only gel in our test group, its ability to cling to vertical surfaces is handy for cleaning trim or other non-horizontal surfaces. Its 5-minute dwell time was middle of the pack.

The gel formula is easier to control during application (no spatters or running) than liquids. There also were no warnings about damage to adjacent surfaces.

Bottom Line: Testers like the gel's versatility and controllability, and its less-harsh nature. Out of a field of effective cleaners, the Star brite gets our Recommendation for ease of application.

STAR BRITE TEAK CLEANER

We also tested Star brite's liquid teak cleaner. This non-acidic liquid is advertised to remove stains without hard rubbing and without raising wood grain. It will not harm fiberglass or painted surfaces and has no dwell time. Active ingredients include sodium hydroxide (lye) and sodium hypochlorite (bleach).

Bottom Line: The no dwell time was a plus, however it was one of the more harsh-smelling cleaners and possible damage to fabric is a consideration.

WEST MARINE ONE-STEP

Boating supply giant West Marine advertises its One Step Teak Cleaner & Brightener for use on lightly soiled teak surfaces. According to West, the One-Step Cleaner restores teak to its natural color, but the phosphoric acid-based liquid may damage gel-coat, paint, and metal surfaces, a big drawback in our eyes. It has a minimal dwell time, two to three minutes.

Bottom Line: As with the Interlux product, the West Marine's brightening capability saves a step.

However, the harshness of the acid-based cleaner and the likelihood it will damage surfaces adjacent to the cleaning area hold the West Marine out of the winners' circle.

CONCLUSION

As we noted in "How We Tested," all of the test products cleaned the teak quite well. So we had to look beyond performance to make our recommendations. One of the criteria we rated the products on was eco-friendliness, or its "green rating." The rationale being that any product gentle enough to be green will be less harsh on teak (and the user).

Of the products we tested, Captain John's Boat Brite took the recommendation for being the most eco-friendly, thanks to its compliance with the EPA's Clean Marina Program, a self-review and recognition program for marinas, boatyards, and boaters. Another EPA program supports green products by allowing them to carry the agency's Design for the Environment (DfE) label. This mark allows consumers to quickly identify and choose products that can help protect the environment and are safer for families. None of the products we tested carried this logo.

The most economic product was the Iosso cleaner, the PS Budget Buy. For a one-step cleaner/brightener, we recommend the Interlux Premium Teak Restorer. And for its versatility and ease of application, we recommend the Star brite gel formula. ▲

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Because salt water is abrasive, it scours the deck as it washes over it, wearing away the softer teak. This, and the constant torture of UV and rain, mean that after a decade or so of sailing, most decks will need to be lightly sanded, and the seams cut back and recaulked.

Teak Tips

Pactical Sailor solicited teak care tips from a few industry veterans, and we found that maintenance methods are like snowflakes: No two are alike.

John Neal—captain of *Mahina Tiare*, a Hallberg-Rassy 46 sail-training ship that has seen more than 117,000 miles—said that once a year, he washes the decks with a very soft, fluffy brush and a solution of fresh water, dish soap, and a little bleach. He lets it sit for 5 minutes or less, and then rinses the deck. Once or twice a year, he uses Boracal, a clear, odorless anti-fungal that doesn't bleach the wood but keeps mold at bay. (You can find it at GS Supply in Vancouver: 604/325-5422.)

Teak-deck manufacturer Teak Decking Systems cautions against using bleach on decks, as does Star brite Vice President Jeff Tieger. "Bleach, harsh laundry detergents, or other harsh household products can wear away teak," Tieger said. For regular maintenance, he suggests washing down the decks with fresh water and a mild boat soap. For bigger jobs, he recommends a teak cleaner or brightener. According to Tieger, even decks should be sealed with an oil or sealer to prolong the life of the teak and to protect the wood from getting the washboard look caused when the soft wood wears away.

Photo by John Neal