

Practical Boat Owner



10 gelcoat cleaners

TESTED

Which gelcoat cleaners are best at combating waterline yellowing on boat hulls? Ben Meakins dons his rubber gloves and puts 10 products to the test

Gelcoat is an amazing material – hard-wearing, easily repairable and eminently restorable – but as it gets older it becomes porous and starts attracting stains. Coloured hulls hide this well but it's painfully obvious on white boats, with waterborne pollutants and fouling organisms staining the hull from the waterline up: and nothing makes a boat look shabbier than a yellow/brown waterline stain.

Luckily for us, there are few more satisfying jobs than removing such stains when you use the right tools. Even better, for once in boat ownership it doesn't require much elbow grease. Instead, a chemical reaction does the job for you. Chandlery shelves groan under the weight of treatments. Most

contain oxalic acid, with some supplied as a liquid and others mixed with a gel to help them stay in contact with the hull as long as possible. There are other acids which will remove the staining, and some people even claim that lemon juice, if left long enough, will help.

However, not all acids will leave the gelcoat untouched, so it's worth using products that are certified safe for boats. Have a look at the label – although oxalic acid is the most common active ingredient, citric acid and phosphoric acid are used in some products.

Online advice suggests buying a tub of oxalic acid powder and mixing it with wallpaper paste to make your own treatment, but the potential for health issues means we've limited this test to products commercially available in the UK. As with any chemical reaction, the



The cleaners are washed off with water and a sponge

results will improve the warmer the temperature (as long as it doesn't dry out) – and Y10, for instance, claims improved results above 10°C. Our test day in February had colder temperatures of around 6-8°C, so we left the products on the hulls for the longest time specified on the containers.

As we were testing the products, a local professional walked past and proffered his own 'home-brewed' potion, which as far as we could make out was hydrochloric acid. This smoked horribly when applied, caught the back of the throat and felt very dangerous, but it cleaned up the gelcoat visibly faster than the others on test.

However, splashing hydrochloric acid around is dangerous – damaging to skin, respiratory systems and the environment – so it can't be recommended.

How we tested them

We borrowed Barney Smith's Impala 28, *Imptish*, which, after a busy season moored on the Hamble River had a heavy brown waterline stain along her 30-year-old white gelcoat. With the boat out of the water at Deacons Boatyard, we cleaned off the hull with fresh water before drying it off and taping out a test panel on the starboard side, with strips between left untreated to show the hull's condition before the test. We applied each product to its panel according to the instructions on the bottle, leaving it on for the maximum time specified before rinsing off and comparing the result with the surrounding areas.



International Stain Remover



PRICE: £12.30/500ML (£24.60/LT)

Contact: www.yachtpaint.com

International Stain Remover is part of a new range of cleaning products. The instructions say that it is to be applied generously with a brush or sponge in small circular motions, left on the surface for 10 minutes and washed off. Application was simple, as described. Upon cleaning off, some light staining remained, requiring a second application in order to shift the more stubborn stains.



Silky Marine Bright

PRICE: £11.99/1LT

Contact: www.silkyproducts.com

This oxalic gel mix is applied with a brush and agitated gently where staining is worst. Leave for 20-30 minutes before agitating again and washing off with fresh water. It is a very thin gel which, like the Star brite Hull Cleaner, foams upon application. After 30 minutes it was easy to wash off, leaving behind a very clean hull, and placing it in the top tier of products.



Star brite Hull Cleaner

PRICE: £19.95/950ML (£21/LT)

Contact: www.starbrite.com

Star brite Hull Cleaner is a thin oxalic acid-based liquid and can be applied with a sprayer or sponge. It foams as applied, and is then left for two minutes and rinsed off with fresh water. This required the least time left on the hull, and after only two minutes the staining had gone. The foaming liquid could be washed off easily and without needing a sponge to shift it.





Farecla Professional Rapid Stain Remover

PRICE: £13.50/500ML (£27/LT)

Contact: www.farecla.com

This oxalic/citric acid mix is sold as a stage two product, 'revive', in a four-stage process that includes wash, revive, restore, and protect as stages. It's intended to be painted on with a soft bristle brush, left for 10 minutes and then rinsed off. A purple, thick and gloopy gel, it spread out easily. The colour in the gel meant that it was easy to see the areas that had been treated. Some light

staining was still present once it had been washed off, and this required a second application to remove.



Y10 Stain Removing Gel

PRICE: £10.95/340G (£32.20/KG)

Contact: www.force4.co.uk

Y10, which comes in a small tub, contains oxalic acid in a gel form. It is brushed on over the stain, left on for 10 minutes and then washed off. It was easy to apply, and the moderately thick blue gel could be spread quite thinly, helping the pot to go further. Once rinsed off it was the most consistent performer on test, with all staining on the panel removed to an even white in the 10 minutes it had been left on.



Meguiar's Heavy Duty Oxidation Remover

PRICE: £12.60/473ML (£26.64/LT)

Contact: www.meguiars.co.uk

This product differs in that it requires polishing to remove 'moderate oxidation, stains and scratches'. It can be applied by machine or by hand: we opted for the latter approach, rubbing it into the surface with a cloth, and immediately wiping dry with a dry cloth.

After three repetitions it was clear that this would require more elbow grease than the acid-based products, but it did leave behind a nice finish to the gelcoat – although quite a lot of brown staining was still present. Using with a cutting pad on a machine polisher would reduce the effort required, but it still wasn't as easy to work with as the others.



Grunt! Boat Cleaner

PRICE: £22.45/1LT

Contact: www.gruntboatcleaner.co.uk

Grunt! Boat Cleaner contains no oxalic or hydrochloric acid, instead containing phosphoric acid (also found in Coca-Cola), and is thus said to be biodegradable and safer to use. It is painted on and left for 30-60 minutes before being washed off. This had to be left on for the longest time of the products tested, but upon rinsing off left the hull as clean as the top tier of products save for the heaviest staining. However, as we tried this one at the bow where the staining was worst, that was to be expected. A second application saw to the remaining stains.



Chine Shine

PRICE: £18.39/2LT (£9.20/LT)

Contact: www.deckhandmarine.com

Chine Shine, which is available in 2, 5 and 20lt containers, is brushed on to the surface, left for 10-15 minutes and rinsed with fresh water. It's a thin gel, blue in colour, and it went a long way. The results upon rinsing were comparable to the best-performing products we tried. It's also the cheapest per litre of the products on test.



Boat Buddy Marine Surface Cleaner

PRICE: £21.91/1LT

Contact: www.boatbuddy.org.uk

Boat Buddy Marine Surface Cleaner is sold as a second-stage product in an eight-stage cleaning system. It's a similar formulation to Grunt! Boat Cleaner, and, as with that product, it's designed to be brushed on, left for 30-60 minutes and then washed off. It left the hull in a good condition, bright white, with the worst areas requiring a second application.



Hempel Cleaning Gel

PRICE: £14.95/500ML (£29.90/LT)

Contact: www.hempel.co.uk

Hempel's Cleaning Gel is a thick bright blue gel, the thickest on test, which required some squeezing to remove from the bottle. It could then be applied with a brush on to the stained area. It should then be left for 15-30 minutes and removed with freshwater hosing. It can be agitated with a brush if required. Some light staining remained after the first application, but a second dose resulted in a clean white hull.



PBO verdict

As expected, all the products we tried improved the hull's colour significantly. There were a few products which gave 'top tier' performance, however – Y10, Star brite Hull Cleaner, Silky Marine Bright and Chine Shine gave the best results in the fastest time.

In the next tier, very nearly as good, were Grunt! and Boat Buddy, which delivered equally good results after a longer time. Next up, International's Stain Remover, Hempel Gelcoat Cleaner and Farecla's Rapid Stain Remover performed well but required a second application on stubborn areas. As all the products except Meguiar's No49 contain some sort of acid, be it oxalic or phosphoric, it's not surprising that the results were all very similar. However, differences lie with the concentration of the acid and the makeup of the gel or liquid in which it's suspended. Gel has the advantage that it 'clings' to the hull and keeps the acid in contact for longer than a thin liquid which can run off – meaning you also use less.

Prices varied considerably. Chine Shine gave great results for the lowest cost per litre (although it's only available in sizes from 2lt upwards), with Silky Marine Bright also coming in cheaply. Y10's gel format gave great results in a short time.



The front and middle of the hull after the test: there's an obvious difference between areas which had been treated and those which hadn't