
Cleaning Sails & Canvas

Excerpt from "Sail Repair Manual" by Jim Grant

There are a number of ways to clean sails. Some are more effective than others. Unfortunately, the most thorough methods also cause the most serious cloth breakdown which leads to greater stretch and, thus, a poorly setting sail. All mechanical methods fall into this category. Even large agitating tubs designed just for sails with carefully regulated water temperature will have the same effect on the sail as several weeks of hard use. And we definitely do not recommend using the machines at local Laundromats — they are never large enough and water temperature is not carefully controlled.

Most sail makers recommend frequent rinsing with fresh water. If that is not sufficient, spread the sail on a smooth, clean surface and brush it lightly with a mild detergent solution or with a specially prepared cleaner such as "Sail-Kleen" or "Sail-Bath" from Davis. The latter is an enzyme detergent that can actually be used to soak away dirt and some stains.

Stains and spots can be removed as follows:

RUST: Soak the affected area in a 5% solution of oxalic acid dissolved in hot water. Follow this with a 2% solution of hydrochloric acid in warm water and, finally, rinse the spot well with clear water.

NUMBER ADHESIVE: Cleaner's benzene used to be used here, but it is evidently rather dangerous and, as a result, very hard to obtain. Paint thinner and gasoline also work although they will leave an oil stain in some cases. Sailrite stocks 3M General Adhesive Remover that works great or you could use Goo Gone found in most hardware stores. Do realize that two or three applications and some serious rubbing and scraping will be necessary no matter what you use.

OIL, TAR, VARNISH: Use trichloroethylene either by itself or in solution with a liquid detergent.

MILDEW: Soak the affected area in a 1% solution of chlorine (household bleach will do) and cold water. Vinegar also serves to control mildew if used rather frequently (it has limited use in correcting a problem that has gotten out of hand).

Whenever confronted with a serious stain, do not expect complete removal. Usually the best that can be expected is a moderation of the discoloration. After cleaning the sail, dry it completely. Mildew will not grow on modern synthetic sailcloth, but it can grow on the dirt that it accumulates if moisture is present. Although mildew will not harm the fabric, it will discolor or spot it.

Fold the sail and store it in a cool, dry place. The method of folding that you select is not very important, though try to keep folds to a minimum. There are several schools of thought regarding how this can best be done—choose whichever seems most convincing to you.

The acrylic canvas (Sunbrella as an example) that is so often used for cover work should be cleaned in accordance with manufacturer's instructions to best maintain its water repellent characteristics. To that end, let me quote from the literature distributed by Glen Raven Mills, the manufacturer of Sunbrella.

"Sunbrella features a soil- and stain-resistant finish that makes clean-up a breeze. Spot wash by sponging briskly with a soapy solution of natural soap in lukewarm water. Rinse thoroughly with clean water to remove soap and air dry. For stubborn stains or suntan lotion, use a fabric stain remover. Follow directions on container. Rinse thoroughly with clean water, and air dry. Solution-dyed acrylic does not promote mildew growth. However, mildew may grow on dirt and other foreign substances that are not removed from the fabric. To clean mildew stains, prepare a mild solution of one cup bleach (non-chlorine bleach is recommended for Sunbrella Plus to prevent damage to the urethane coating) plus two cap-fulls of a natural soap per gallon of water. Spray on entire area and allow to soak in. If necessary, scrub vigorously with a sponge or clean rag. Sponge thoroughly with clean water, and air dry."

When boat canvas begins to leak, it can be coated with a silicone liquid. I used to recommend Aqua-Tite. It will not discolor the fabric nor will it harden it. But it is not compatible with the original factory finish and tends to work unevenly unless the fabric has been washed several times. 303 Fabric Guard is much better. It will lengthen the original characteristics of the fabric if used right away. And, if used only when needed, it will restore the original fabric finish. This is the only treatment recommended by the Glen Raven mill itself.

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