

How to Clean Cemetery Markers

We have all visited cemeteries with monuments covered in vines and moss or caked-on dirt. It is a sad condition in which to see them. With the best intentions folks venture out to spiffy up the markers. Often, though, their intentions are diminished by the way the monuments are cleaned.

Although grave markers are usually made of seemingly strong materials, they can be fragile. Outdoors, monuments face a daily onslaught of sun, wind and rain that slowly erodes them. Cleaning a damaged monument will accelerate its deterioration. A trained conservator must take care of damaged markers.

Monuments can also be cleaned too frequently, no more than once every couple of years is best for their longevity. Cleaning can help preserve the markers by limiting their exposure to organic growth. Here are few tips to cleaning cemetery markers.

Do not clean monuments in following conditions:

- If the monument moves when you gently push on it.
- If the monument's surface is cracked, flaking, or eroding.
- If the weather is very hot or below freezing temperatures are expected.

Equipment

- Soft, natural bristle (i.e., Tampico) brushes of various sizes
- Soft tooth brushes
- Wooden craft sticks (e.g., popsicle sticks)
- A plastic scraper or plastic putty knife
- Plastic buckets
- Small broom
- Protective eyeglasses, rubber gloves, knee pads

never use metal tools, scouring pads or adhesive tape



Evaluation

- Get permission from the cemetery to clean gravestones before you clean. Some cemeteries only allow family members to clean stones

of their family. Some cemeteries do not allow non-staff to clean stones.

- Once you have permission, assess the area around the gravestone that you want to clean. Are there trip hazards? Are there dangerous grave markers around the stone you want to clean? Are there “widow makers” on trees overhanging your stone? Inform the cemetery if you find any hazards.
- Now move closer to your stone and take a picture. This step is often neglected. You want a “before” photo for the record. Fill the frame with the gravestone and take multiple angles.
- Now evaluate the condition of the stone you want to clean. Is it leaning precariously? Has it shifted on its base? Does it look “fragile”? If yes to any of these, do not clean it! Stone is very heavy and you do not want to hurt yourself or cause the stone any damage. Consider spritzing it with D/2 and walking away (see Chemical Solution Option).



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- Move in closer yet and touch your stone. Does it move? If it is a tablet stone, try wiggling it with two fingers. If it moves, do not clean it! Consider spritzing it with D/2 and walking away (see Step 14).
- Are there any significant plants next to the stone that are important to the cemetery? Make sure the cemetery is aware that you may be doing harm to plants around the stone.



Cleaning

- Now you are ready to clean your gravestone. You really only need four tools: a wooden stick, a soft bristle brush, a bucket, and water. Do not use any metal tools!
- On stable stone surfaces, wet the stone thoroughly with clean running water or a garden sprayer. Do not remove biologics without thoroughly wetting the stone. The water will wash away some of the dirt and biological material. Pull plants gently from cracks or clip them, and then brush away soil and debris from the stone. If there is a mass of plant life, do not yank the plant out, you will almost certainly damage the stone.

Carefully clip and pluck each section to prevent pulling away any loose or weakened stone fragments.

- Once the worst of the biologics are removed, using scrapers that are softer than the stone, such as a wooden popsicle stick or caramel apple skewer, gently brush or scrape off algae, lichen, and fungus.
- Gently scrub the stone with very light pressure in a circular motion using a natural soft-bristle brush to further remove soil and biological growth from the stone. (On harder granite, you can use a soft nylon bristle brush, if you like, as shown in the photos.) Do not use a dry brush as the abrasion from a dry brush can cause damage by removing the outer layers of the stone. Constantly dunk your brush in a bucket of water, or better, allow a water hose to run on the stone as you brush.

- Rinse your brush frequently. Do not abrade the stone by dragging dirt, sand, stone particles across the surface you are cleaning. If a gravestone is particularly dirty, change the water in your bucket frequently, so that you are not dipping your brush into a suspended solution of grit and biological matter.
- When done, rinse the stone thoroughly with water.
- Step back and admire your work. Be sure to take an “after” photo for the record.



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Chemical Solution Option

- If you would like to use a cemetery-approved cleaner to further lighten any biological staining on the stone, now is the time to do it. There are several cleaners marketed to work on stone but at this point in time only one cleaner has been recommended by the National Park Service: D/2 Biological Solution. It is the gentlest on the environment, yet highly effective. D/2 is an anti-biologic, so it works on organics such as moss, lichens, fungus, etc. And it will keep working over time for months beyond the initial cleaning.
- Spray D/2 on the damp stone, covering it completely, and allow 5-10 minutes to work.
- Lightly scrub the D/2 into the entire stone keeping the stone damp with the D/2.
- Rinse the entire stone thoroughly with clean water.
- Step back, admire your work once again, and come back in a month and see if the stone looks even cleaner. D/2 often needs to be reapplied as just a spritz to further eliminate staining.

***Information provided by OPRD
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