



How to Clean a Granite Headstone

A Southern California Guide

Hard water deposits. Cemetery irrigation. Mineral buildup. If you're in Southern California, the challenge is different, and so is the solution.

WHY THIS GUIDE EXISTS

A Practical Guide From *Our Workshop*

After decades of making and caring for granite memorials across Southern California, we put together this guide for the families who asked us, again and again, the same question: what's safe to use?

From **35 years of engraving experience**, what works, what doesn't, and what can permanently damage the stone.

WHY SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA IS DIFFERENT

It's Not Moss. It's Not Lichen. *It's Hard Water.*

THE SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA SITUATION

Most headstone cleaning advice is written for other parts of the country.

In the Pacific Northwest, the problem is moss and biological growth. In the Southeast, it's humidity and mildew. In New England, it's weathering and lichen. Here in Southern California, the primary culprit is something entirely different: **hard water mineral deposits** — the white, chalky, or crusty buildup left behind by cemetery irrigation systems.

Most Southern California cemeteries irrigate their lawns with well water drawn from local aquifers. That water is loaded with calcium, magnesium, and other dissolved minerals. Every time the sprinklers run, those minerals are deposited onto the face of the stone. Over months and years, they build up into a film — sometimes a thick crust — that clouds the polish, obscures the lettering, and makes the monument look dull and neglected.

The instinct many families have is to reach for something strong — a lime remover, a calcium dissolver, even vinegar. **That is exactly the wrong approach.** The very chemistry that dissolves mineral deposits also attacks granite itself. Before you clean, it's important to understand why.

WHAT TO USE, AND WHAT TO AVOID

The Right Products. *The Wrong Products.*

Granite is durable, but its polished surface is more vulnerable than most people realize. Here is what 35 years of working with these stones has taught us.

READY-MADE OPTIONS

Stone-Safe Products *You Can Buy*

If you'd rather use a ready-made cleaner, look for one labeled safe for natural stone and acid-free. Two good choices:

Black Diamond Stoneworks Natural Stone Soap Scum Remover

An acid-free spray, sold on Amazon, that wipes away hard water film and soap scum without etching the polish.

MB Stone Care MB-3 Soap & Mineral Deposit Remover

A non-acid cleaner from a professional stone-care brand, made to dissolve mineral deposits with little scrubbing.

✓ Safe to Use

Powdered Dishwashing Detergent

A mild powder dishwashing detergent, the kind you'd use in a dishwasher, mixed with water is one of the most effective and stone-safe cleaners available. It cuts through surface grime and light mineral buildup without attacking the granite. Apply with water, scrub gently, and rinse thoroughly.

Soft-Bristle Brush

A natural-fiber or soft nylon bristle brush is the right tool for scrubbing a granite monument. It provides enough agitation to lift deposits without scratching the polished surface. Never use wire brushes, metal bristles, or stiff plastic brushes.

Barbecue Grill Brick (Pumice Block)

For stubborn hard water deposits on polished granite, a pumice-type grill cleaning brick can gently abrade the mineral crust from the stone's surface without damaging the underlying polish, when used carefully, with water, and with a light hand. Work in small sections and rinse frequently.

Clean Water, and Plenty of It

Water is your best friend throughout the entire process. Keep the stone wet while you work, and rinse completely when you're done. Any residue left behind can dry and leave new deposits. Bring more water than you think you'll need.

pH-Neutral Stone Cleaners

Products specifically formulated for natural stone are a safe choice. We carry these at VJ Memorials, and they're also available from stone care suppliers. Look for "pH neutral" on the label. These products clean without disrupting the mineral structure of the granite.

✕ Never Use These

CLR, Lime-Away & Calcium Removers

These products are designed to dissolve calcium and mineral deposits, which sounds like exactly what you need. The problem is that granite itself contains calcium and other minerals as part of its composition. These products don't distinguish between the deposit and the stone. They will etch the surface and permanently dull the polish.

Vinegar & Acidic Cleaners

Vinegar is recommended on many headstone cleaning websites. It is wrong advice, especially for polished granite. Vinegar is acidic. Acids etch granite, eating into the polished surface and causing a cloudy, dull appearance that worsens over time. The same applies to lemon juice.

Bleach & Bleach-Based Products

Bleach is the most commonly misused product on granite headstones. It can permanently discolor and lighten the stone, and it breaks down the surface over repeated use. It may appear to clean in the short term, but the damage it causes is irreversible.

Oils, Waxes & Polishes

When a stone looks dull, the instinct is to shine it, with car wax, furniture polish, or oil. These products don't restore polish on outdoor granite. Instead, they soak into the porous surface and alter the color of the stone from the inside, creating dark staining that is difficult to remove.

Wire Brushes & Abrasive Pads

Wire brushes scratch and gouge the polished surface of granite, sometimes deeply enough to remove lettering or surface details entirely. Steel wool, metal scrubbers, and rough abrasive pads cause the same damage. The scratches they leave behind cannot be polished out without professional equipment.

Pressure Washers

High-pressure water can strip layers from the stone surface and force water deep into any existing cracks, accelerating deterioration. Even at lower settings, pressure washers are too aggressive for a polished granite monument. Leave this equipment to professionals.

CLEANING YOUR MONUMENT

Step by *Step*

For most Southern California families dealing with hard water buildup, this approach works well and is safe for the stone.

1 What to Bring

A bucket, powdered dishwashing detergent, a soft-bristle brush, a barbecue grill brick (for heavy mineral deposits), and several gallons of clean water. If the cemetery has a water source, confirm in advance — but don't count on it.

Tip: Clean in the morning or late afternoon when the stone is cool. Avoid hot direct sun.

2 Wet the Stone Thoroughly

Before applying any cleaner, saturate the entire monument with clean water. A wet surface prevents cleaner from drying too quickly and helps loosen surface deposits. Keep the stone wet throughout the entire process.

Tip: Start from the bottom and work up — this prevents dirty water from streaking areas you've already cleaned.

3 Apply Detergent & Scrub Gently

Mix powdered dishwashing detergent with water to make a mild solution. Apply it to the stone and scrub with your soft-bristle brush in gentle circular motions. Pay special attention to lettering and engraved areas; a soft toothbrush works well for these details.

4 For Stubborn Hard Water Deposits

If mineral crust remains after scrubbing, use a barbecue grill brick (wet) and very gently work across the affected area. Keep the stone wet and use light, even pressure. The brick removes the mineral layer from the surface without harming the granite beneath.

Caution: Use the brick only on polished granite surfaces. Do not use on sandblasted or rough finishes.

5 Rinse Completely

This step matters as much as the cleaning itself. Rinse the entire monument with plenty of clean water until no soap or detergent remains. Any residue left on the surface can dry and leave new deposits behind, undoing your work.

6 Dry & Inspect

Allow the stone to dry fully, then inspect. Light mineral deposits may require a second pass. Heavy buildup that doesn't respond to this process may require professional cleaning. If you're unsure, give us a call.

Once a year is the right maintenance interval for most Southern California monuments.

The Simple Rule: *Treat It Like a Granite Countertop*

Most families already have granite somewhere in their home — kitchen countertops, bathroom vanities, or flooring. And most people have heard, at some point, that you shouldn't use vinegar or harsh cleaners on granite countertops.

The same rule applies to a granite headstone. In fact, it applies with even more force, because an outdoor monument has no sealer protecting it the way an indoor countertop does. The surface is more exposed, more porous, and more vulnerable.

Before you bring anything to the cemetery, ask yourself: **would I use this on my kitchen counter?** If the answer is no, leave it at home.

THE GRANITE COUNTERTOP RULE

“If you wouldn't use it on your kitchen counter, don't use it on a headstone.”

CLR, lime removers, vinegar, bleach, abrasive cleansers, waxes, oils — none of these belong on an indoor granite surface, either. That instinct you have at home? Trust it at the cemetery too.

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“In all our years of working with these stones, the hardest thing to fix is damage that was caused by cleaning. The stone itself lasts centuries. The wrong cleaner can do real harm in an afternoon.”

— Rob Provines, VJ Memorials

COMMON QUESTIONS

What Families *Ask Us Most*

Can I use vinegar to remove hard water deposits?

NO, AVOID THIS

Despite being recommended on many websites, vinegar is an acid, and acids damage granite. On a polished surface, vinegar etches the stone, creating dull spots and permanent cloudiness. Stick with mild dish detergent and a soft brush, or a pumice grill brick for heavier deposits.

What about CLR or Lime-Away?

NO, DO NOT USE

These products are designed to dissolve calcium and lime, which is exactly what mineral deposits are made of. The problem is that granite contains the same minerals. The product cannot tell the difference between the deposit and the stone. Repeated use will etch and pit the surface permanently.

Is it okay to use bleach to brighten the stone?

NO, AVOID THIS

Bleach can permanently lighten and discolor granite. It may appear to work in the short term, but over time it breaks down the surface and causes staining that is worse than what it was meant to fix. It also kills grass and plants near the monument.

Can I apply wax or polish to restore the shine?

NO, DO NOT APPLY

Wax, oil, and polish do not restore outdoor granite. Instead, they absorb into the stone and alter its color from the inside, a form of staining that is very difficult to reverse. If a monument has lost its polish, professional restoration is the right path.

Is the grill brick really safe on granite?

YES, WITH CARE

A pumice-type grill cleaning brick, used wet, with light pressure, on polished granite only, is an effective tool for breaking up mineral crust without damaging the underlying surface. Use it only on the polished black or gray faces of the monument, not on rough or sandblasted areas.

How often should I clean the headstone?

ONCE A YEAR

For most Southern California cemeteries, once a year is the right maintenance schedule, ideally in spring before Memorial Day. If the monument is in a particularly wet or heavily irrigated area, two cleanings per year may be worthwhile. Regular light maintenance prevents heavy buildup.

What if the deposits won't come off?

Heavy, long-term mineral buildup may require professional cleaning. Some situations, particularly when deposits have penetrated deeply into the stone's surface, are beyond what safe DIY methods can address. Give us a call at VJ Memorials. We'll take a look and let you know whether professional restoration is needed and what that process looks like.

Does the cemetery have any rules about cleaning?

Many cemeteries have policies about what products and methods are permitted on their grounds. Before visiting with cleaning supplies, it's worth a quick call to the cemetery office. Some prohibit certain chemicals or require that work be done during certain hours.

QUESTIONS? WE'RE HERE TO HELP.

Come *Sit With Us*

After nearly 60 years of making and caring for granite memorials across Southern California, there isn't much we haven't seen. If you have questions about your loved one's monument — cleaning, repairs, added inscriptions, or anything else — we're always glad to talk.

VISIT OUR FACTORY

4737 Schaefer Ave.

Chino, CA 91710

No appointment required.

HOURS

Mon – Fri · 8:00 am – 5:00 pm

Saturday · 8:30 am – 2:30 pm

CALL US

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