

VJ MEMORIALS · EST. 1966 · HELPFUL INFORMATION



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, and Rob's own routine for the pieces in our own yard, has taught us.

READY-MADE OPTIONS

Stone-Safe Products *You Can Buy*

If you'd rather use ready-made products, here are the four we point families to: two stone-safe cleaners, and the scrub brush and grill brick used in the step-by-step routine on page 6.

Black Diamond Stoneworks — Stone & Tile Intensive Cleaner

An acid-free, biodegradable concentrate made for marble, granite, and other natural stone. Lifts hard water film and everyday grime without harsh chemicals. amazon.com/dp/B0044FX4LO

MB Stone Care — Soap & Mineral Kit

A two-piece, non-acid kit from a professional stone-care brand: the MB-5 spray for everyday cleaning, plus the MB-3 remover for tougher soap and mineral deposit buildup. amazon.com/dp/B08G5BHB99

SetSail — Heavy-Duty Scrub Brush

Stiff white bristles built for real scrubbing. This is the brush used in the step-by-step routine, for the flat polished surface as well as the engraving and lettering. amazon.com/dp/B09V57X5WM

Grillmaster GM36 — Grill Brick

Compressed pumice, not a bathroom pumice stone. This is what actually lifts hard water buildup off the polish, gently, without harming the stone. amazon.com/dp/B00ADPCDNO

We don't sell these products ourselves and aren't compensated for these links. We're simply sharing what's worked well for families.

✓ Safe to Use

Mild Liquid Dish Soap (Dawn)

A bucket of water with two drops of Dawn dish soap, poured over the stone or worked into the brush, is the base of the whole routine. It cuts through surface grime and everyday buildup without attacking the granite.

White Scrub Brush

A stiff, white scrub brush (not wire, not metal) is the tool for the job. Scrub the flat polished surface as well as the engraving and lettering. Never use wire brushes, metal bristles, or stiff plastic scouring pads.

Grill Brick (Pumice Block)

For hard water deposits, a grill brick, real compressed pumice, not a bathroom pumice stone, removes the mineral crust off polished granite while the stone is still wet, in a rubbing motion. Keep it off the engraving, especially any painted lettering; pressing a grill brick into a painted letter can pull the paint out with it. Work in small sections.

Clean Water, and Plenty of It

Water is your best friend throughout the entire process. Rinse after scrubbing, and once more after the grill brick. No need to towel-dry, most markers dry naturally in the sun and get wet daily anyway from the cemetery's own sprinklers.

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.

X 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 one of the most commonly misused products 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.

Step by *Step*

This is the routine we actually use and recommend, water, soap, a scrub brush, and a grill brick for the hard water buildup. Once or twice a year is plenty for most markers.

1

What to Bring

A bucket, Dawn dish soap, a white scrub brush, a grill brick (for hard water deposits), and 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

Mix & Scrub

Fill the bucket with water and add two drops of Dawn dish soap. Pour it over the stone, or work it into the brush. Scrub the stone with the brush, working into the engraving and the lettering as well as the flat, polished surface.

Tip: A soft toothbrush works well for tight lettering.

3

Rinse

Rinse the stone with clean water. This step matters as much as the scrubbing itself, any soap left on the surface can dry and leave new deposits behind.

4

Grill Brick While Wet

While the stone is still wet, go over the polished areas with the grill brick in a rubbing motion. It scrapes the water scum right off, it won't hurt the polish or damage the stone underneath.

Caution: Keep the grill brick off the engraving, especially any painted lettering. Pressing it into a painted letter can pull the paint out with it. Use it on polished granite only, not on sandblasted or rough finishes.

5

Rinse Once More

Rinse the whole stone again with clean water. No need to dry it by hand, it dries naturally in the sun, and most markers get wet daily anyway from the cemetery's own sprinklers.

6

Inspect

Light mineral deposits may need a second pass with the grill brick. Heavy buildup that doesn't respond to this process may call for professional cleaning. If you're unsure, give us a call.

Once or twice 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.

35 YEARS OF ENGRAVING · VJ MEMORIALS · EST. 1966

"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

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 soap and a scrub brush, or a 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

Yes, with care. A grill brick, used wet, on the polished surface, in a rubbing motion, lifts hard water buildup without harming the polish underneath, simply and easily. Keep it off the engraving entirely, especially painted lettering, where it can pull the paint out along with the buildup. Use it on polished granite only, not on rough or sandblasted areas.

How often should I clean the headstone?

ONCE OR TWICE A YEAR

Once or twice a year is plenty for most Southern California markers. If a stone sits close to a sprinkler head, or the cemetery irrigates heavily, it may need a rinse more often. Regular light maintenance keeps heavy buildup from forming in the first place.

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.



One of our professional cleanings: the same monument, one half cleaned and one half still weathered.

VISIT OUR FACTORY

4737 Schaefer Ave.
Chino, CA 91710
No appointment required.

CALL US

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corinne@vjmemorials.com

HOURS

Mon – Fri · 8:00 am – 5:00 pm
Saturday · 8:30 am – 2:30 pm

ONLINE

vjmemorials.com
[instagram.com/vjmemorials](https://www.instagram.com/vjmemorials)

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