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How to Use a Pressure Washer

This versatile outdoor tool cleans your home, deck, car, and more.

BY [DAN STOUT](#) UPDATED: FEB 24, 2025 3:20 PM EST

Pressure washers are incredibly useful tools that not enough homeowners have a lot of experience with. It can turn a simple [garden hose](#) into a high-powered, effective cleaning machine perfect for countless items in your home and [yard](#). Some of the most common uses for a household pressure washer include blasting grime off concrete, clearing debris from gutters, and removing dirt and mildew from siding,

outdoor furniture, boats, ATVs, old tools, cars and trucks, concrete driveways, garage floors, grills, patios, and fencing. Not bad for one tool, right?

All told, a pressure washer is the consummate outdoor cleaning tool when properly used. It can provide a gentle wash of water and detergent, or a powerful blast of water that cuts through years of accumulated dirt and grime.

The Expert: I spent over 15 years in the construction industry, and pressure washers have always been one of my favorite tools. There's something immensely satisfying about the immediate, obvious difference it makes, especially when cleaning off a driveway or patio. I've used gas and electric powered pressure washers to do everything from clearing mud off of drilling equipment to bringing concrete sidewalks back to life. I always keep at least one pressure washer in my garage; my preference is for a corded electric model on large wheels, since I value mobility around the yard.

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What to Look For in a Pressure Washer

Our advice here is based on the needs of a typical homeowner. We'll note where you may want to boost your power, but if you're a contractor or otherwise using a pressure washer in a commercial setting, our suggestions may require some modification.

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The first factor to consider is the power source, as it impacts price, performance, power, and maintenance. Corded electric washers are less expensive to purchase and don't require as much maintenance. Electric models for home use typically run \$100 to \$300, while gas-powered models cost anywhere from \$300 to \$800 (and professional-grade washers can cost significantly more than that).

Without the need for an extension cord, gas-powered washers have more freedom of movement than electric models. But both gas and electric washers will be tethered to

your water supply, and their mobility is limited to the length of your garden hose.

There are battery-powered pressure washers on the market, but currently they're either underpowered or overpriced. Their prices vary from \$70 to \$700.

What PSI Pressure Washer Do I Need?

Once you determine the type of pressure washer you want, the main metric to consider is the water pressure and volume the washer produces. Measured at the nozzle, the PSI (pounds per square inch) is the maximum pressure the washer is capable of providing. Water volume is measured in gallons per minute (GPM).

PSI is often used to classify the pressure washer as a *light duty* pressure washer or a *heavy duty* pressure washer —where the actual dividing line lies is subjective to the

brand. Generally speaking, light duty washers have 1800 PSI or less, while heavy duty washers have 2800 or higher PSI.

A higher PSI is needed to spray from a greater distance or with more force. So a heavy duty washer would do better when clearing gutters on two-story homes, or when trying to remove grease or oil stains from a garage floor.

It's important to note that the PSI rating of the pressure washer is the maximum available. You'll be able to reduce the PSI with nozzles and attachments, and some pressure washers have an adjustable PSI setting. This means high PSI pressure washers can often be used for more delicate jobs, but light-duty pressure washers can't be used for more intense work. So choose a pressure washer that can handle the most demanding tasks you'll need it for, and you'll still be able to use it for lower PSI tasks.



Here are some max PSI suggestions for some materials commonly cleaned with pressure washers.


- 1500 PSI or less – Washing cars and trucks
- 2500 PSI – Cleaning wood decks and fencing, boats
- 3000 PSI – Cleaning siding, gutters, and driveways
- 4000 PSI – Removing oil and grime off a garage floor

Some materials, such as composite decking and brick, are harder to categorize. For composite decking, check the manufacturer's guidelines. TimberTech recommends "a fan tip and a maximum of 1500 PSI" while TREX has different pressure washer recommendations depending on which generation of product you installed. (Original TREX recommended no pressure washer at all, while modern TREX decking can be cleaned with a fan tip at up to 3100 PSI.)


Similarly, pressure washing brick requires a cautious approach. (I've personally seen bricks ruined by careless use of a pressure washer.) Depending on age and condition,

some brick-and-mortar structures can withstand up to 1500 PSI, while others should only be hand cleaned with a brush and garden hose.





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When you're not sure what PSI to use, the rule of thumb is to start by working with the nozzle at least 1 foot away from the material, with the lowest PSI available. Then increase the PSI until the material comes clean.

Because pressure washer nozzles spray outward at an angle, the closer you get to the work material, the smaller the surface area that will be cleaned. For instance, cleaning a particularly grimy driveway with a light-duty washer might require getting close, and having a smaller spray area to access the maximum power of the device, while a more powerful washer would allow you to stand farther away, and give you a wider spray area to achieve the same or better results. This means you'll be able to clean in larger swaths with a more-powerful washer in a shorter period of time.

Along with PSI, there is another metric to consider — GPM (gallons per minute of water) —which represents how much water the washer will use. When dealing with loose materials, such as a clogged gutter or a muddy car, a higher GPM will be more useful than a higher PSI. If you'll be doing a lot of that kind of cleaning, look for a pressure washer with a GPM of 2.0 or greater.

When shopping for pressure washer attachments such as a foam cannon or surface cleaner, look for recommended PSI and GPM ranges. To work effectively, many attachments need to be connected to a pressure washer with a “sweet spot” of PSI or GPM – not too much, and not too little.

Best Practices and What to Know Before You Get Started

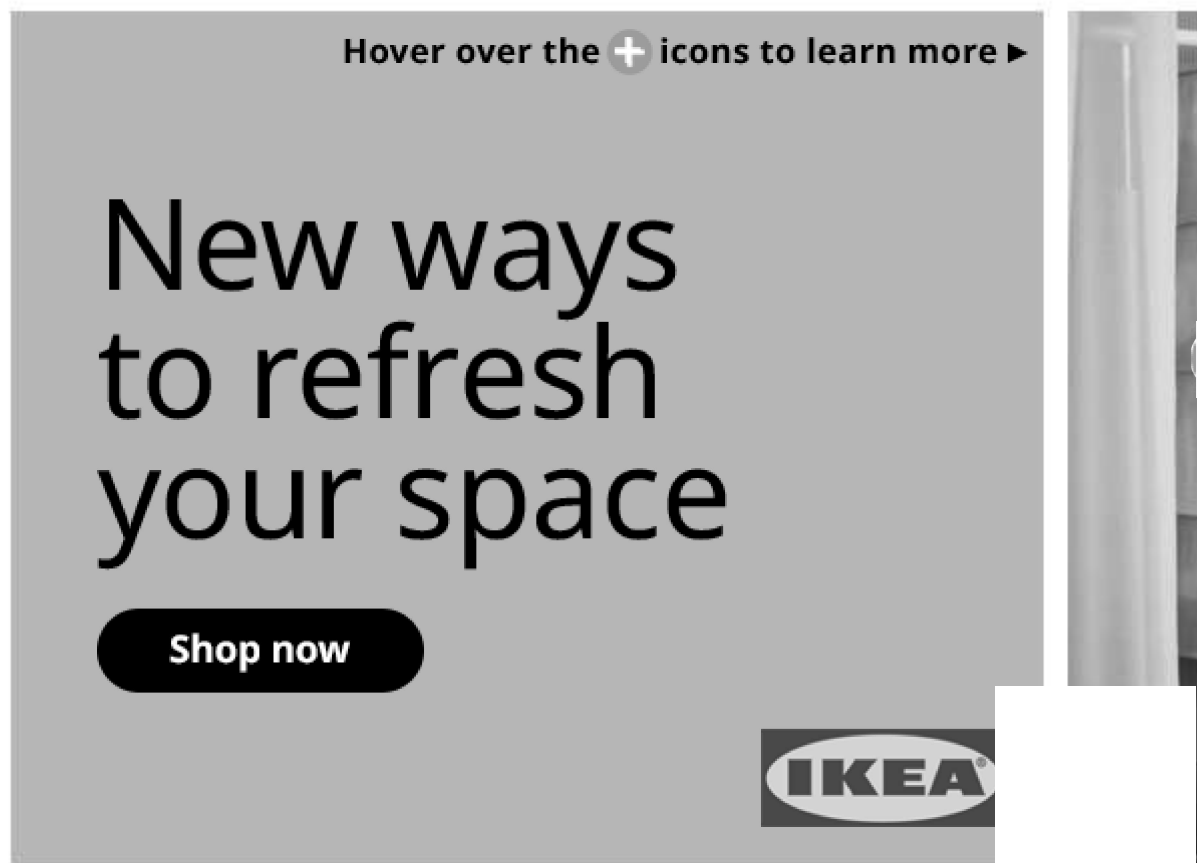
To get started, here's what you need: A garden hose and, if you're using an electric model, an electrical outlet. And the washer should come with ground fault circuit interrupter (GFCI) protection, to protect from electrical shock with all that water spraying around.

Safety gear is a must. Focus on both foot and eye protection. The splash-back on pressure washed dirt can easily lodge in your eye. The result is unpleasant at best (a little mud) or a trip to the hospital at worst (a wooden or metal sliver). Many people use their pressure washer during summer and are tempted to wear sandals or flip flops. At the very least, wear boots. If you're using a heavy-duty pressure washer, consider steel-toe boots.

There are a number of accessories to make cleaning certain items easier. There are car cleaning kits to ensure you don't damage the vehicle accidentally, gutter cleaning kits to help clear debris while keeping your feet firmly on the ground, and area cleaners to make cleaning driveways and floors go faster. None of these are strictly necessary, but if you'll be using the washer for specific tasks, they can speed the process.

How to Prep For Pressure Washing Tasks

What you need to do ahead of time is minimal. The main issue to deal with is all the water that will splash back from the cleaning process. Move aside or cover anything you don't want to get wet and double-check the area to be sure there are no exposed electrical boxes.



Check to see where it is that the water will run off. Your home's siding may look sparkly clean, but you might be pouring gallons and gallons of water against your foundation.

How to Use a Pressure Washer

To get started, thread the garden hose to the washer, insert the widest-angle spray tip into the wand, and you're ready to begin cleaning.

No matter the job, start with minimal aggression, and adjust as needed. Work at a distance, with a wide-angle tip, then move in closer and swap-out the tip as needed to get the material clean. Working too close can damage the material you're cleaning and it risks hurling debris into your face. Remember that it's easy to bring the nozzle closer to the material, but once you damage the material, you've got a much bigger headache.

To avoid straining the pressure washer's motor, work in short bursts. Think 5 to 10 seconds, then release the trigger and let the motor cool for a second or two. During operation, move the sprayer in constant, controlled motion. Linger on a specific area will focus the water pressure; this might clear a hard-to-clean section, but it also increases the risk of damaging the material you're cleaning.

Finding the right balance between distance, nozzle, and cleaning speed may take a little trial and error. When in doubt, start at a healthy distance, and creep up on the material.

Pressure Washer Maintenance

Gas-powered pressure washers require more maintenance than electric models. In exchange for their increased power, you'll need to top off the oil, change spark plugs, and swap out clean filters. Basically, it's the same amount of maintenance as other small-engine tools like lawnmowers or chainsaws.

All pressure washers need to be winterized if stored in an area where the temperatures will drop below freezing. Follow the manufacturer's instructions, but this generally requires putting a little antifreeze in the soap reservoir and running it until any water has been flushed out of the system.

Pressure Washers We Recommend

Now that you know a bit more about what pressure washers can do and what to look for, here are some product recommendations. In making these selections, I searched

for a balance of PSI, GPM, and portability in these washers, with the assumption that if you're in the market for a gas-powered model, you're looking for higher PSI.

I also relied on established brands. I have extensive experience using Karcher and Westinghouse washers (my own Karcher electric washer has been going strong for almost eight years). Simpson pressure washers were recommended when I reached out to other contractors to get their opinion. I checked the manufacturer's web sites for specs, and confirmed that the following models were available at the time of writing.

BEST OVERALL ELECTRIC PRESSURE WASHER



Karcher 2000 PSI Electric Pressure Washer

Now 25% Off

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PROS

⊕ Durable

⊕ **Bundled with accessories**

CONS

⊗ **Lowest PSI of our featured pressure washers**

This Karcher model offers PSI that's right at the line between light- and medium-duty, making it a solid choice for general household cleaning and projects. The washer comes with multiple wands and cleaning kits, so it's easier to move from high-pressure concrete cleaning to a much gentler car wash.

The wheeled base makes it easier to move around, and the Karcher mobile app includes advice on setting up your washer and usage guides. It doesn't have the PSI and GPM that some other electric models do, but it comes with accessories like a foam cannon, along with Karcher's reputation as a robust performer making this an optimal choice for DIYers.

BEST VALUE ELECTRIC PRESSURE WASHER



Westinghouse ePX3500

\$159 AT AMAZON

~~\$200~~ \$179 AT WALMART

\$159 AT HOME DEPOT

PROS

- ⊕ Higher than average PSI and GPM at this price point

CONS

- ⊗ Smaller wheels will struggle on uneven surfaces

The Westinghouse ePX3500 serves up a respectable 2500 PSI in a compact and lightweight (just 19 pounds) package.

Standing less than 17 inches tall with four individually rotating wheels (that are also lockable) for maximum mobility, it's an incredibly stable package that resists the tendency of smaller hand-held models to tip over during use. That said, the smaller diameter wheels will struggle to cross uneven terrain. The pressure washer's Total Stop System automatically stops the pump when the trigger is not engaged which conserves energy, prolongs pump life, and prevents accidental usage.

The small body makes it a great choice for DIYers with limited storage space, and the price is great.

BEST OVERALL GAS-POWERED PRESSURE WASHER



Simpson PS3228 PowerShot

\$599 AT AMAZON

SHOP AT WALMART

\$2,024 AT SAM'S CLUB

PROS

- ⊕ Reliable Honda motor

CONS

- ⊗ Heavy
- ⊗ Not available in California

The Simpson PowerShot straddles the line between a consumer- and professional-grade pressure washer. With its higher PSI (3,300) and GPM (2.5 gallons per minute), it can be used for more demanding tasks like graffiti removal and cleaning grease and oil stains in addition to more common household tasks like cleaning fences or decks.

The PS3228 is powered by a Honda GX200 engine, and seated on a durable, welded steel frame with powder coated finish. It's not small or light at 77 pounds, but the 10-inch wheels make moving it around relatively simple.

BEST VALUE GAS-POWERED PRESSURE WASHER



Westinghouse WPX3400

\$334 AT AMAZON

PROS

- ⊕ Good balance of price and performance
- ⊕ CARB compliant for use in California

CONS

- ⊗ Lesser warranty compared to other pro-grade washers
- ⊗ Relatively small fuel tank

The WPX3400 pressure washer from Westinghouse delivers 3400 PSI and 2.6 GPM. It's powered by a Westinghouse motor, though it has slightly less than a gallon capacity in its fuel tank. It's a reasonable choice if you need the power provided by gas, but don't need the daily-use durability of a commercial washer.

West coast homeowners take note: the WPX3400 is CARB compliant, meaning that it produces emissions low enough that it can be purchased and used in California.

FAQ With Our Expert Dan Stout

↓ **Is there a difference between pressure washers and power washers?**

↓ **Do I just need the most powerful pressure washer I can afford?**

↓ **Are pressure washers dangerous?**

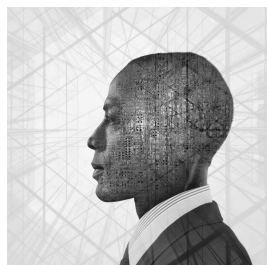
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DAN STOUT

A former residential remodeler and maintenance manager, Dan Stout has worked in nearly every part of the construction and DIY industry, from project planning and permitting to plumbing, drywall, carpentry, and more. He loves to write about the weird history of everyday objects, and to help readers make informed decisions about their homes.

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