

How to Wash Dishes When Camping

September 13, 2012 By [Clarke Green](#)

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In the age of the automatic dishwasher most folks have little to no idea of how to hand wash dishes at home let alone when camping. I still see Scouts washing dishes underneath a community water spigot or, even worse, in a stream or lake.

Good dish washing technique will help you stay healthy (especially on extended trips) and minimize impact in the wild.

Here's a short version

1. **Pre-Rinse** – each individual uses a little bit of drinking water to rinse out their dishes and utensils, drinks that rinse water, and then puts their dishes on the wash pile.
 2. **Hot Water Wash** (First Dish Pan) using as little soap as possible the dishes are washed. The cleanest dishes go first, the dirtiest dishes go last.
 3. **Hot Water Rinse** (Second Dish Pan) once all the soapy water has been shaken off the dishes they are rinsed in hot water.
 4. **Sanitizing Soak** (Third Dish Pan) rinsed dishes go into a sanitizing soak.
- Once the dishes are clean the dishwater is strained and any remaining food particles are packed out in the trash.

The Gear



A set of three plastic dish pans (for car camping), biodegradable dish soap, a dish towel, a dish brush, a nylon scrubby pad, a strainer, and Steramine tablets.

Here's my dish washing gear suggestions –
[Campsuds Biodegradable Soap](#)
[Steramine Quaternary Sanitizing Tablets](#)
[Oxo Palm Brush](#)
[Nylon Mesh Strainer](#)

For cast iron and other metal cookware
[Inspired Basics Cast Iron Cleaner](#) (see my review [here](#))
[Polycarbonate Pan Scrapers](#)

First Things First

Heat a pot of dishwater on the fire as soon as the meal is served. Once the meal is done the dishpans are laid out and a four step process begins:

Set Up Your Station

First Dishpan

Put a couple of inches of hot water in the first dishpan (if it is too hot you'll want to add some cold water, so go easy).

Add a *small* amount of biodegradable soap like [Campsuds](#) – about *two* drops – if more is needed it goes in a drop at a time.

Scouts generally use way too much soap and leave a lot of it on the dishes fouling the rinse water – once they learn to use just a few drops of soap (you can always add more but you can't take soap out once it's in the water) and to drain this soapy water off the dishes completely they'll have a better result.

Second Dishpan

The second dishpan gets a few inches of hot water only.

Third Dishpan

The third dishpan is filled with water (it can be any temperature) and two [Steramine tablets](#). They stay in this dishpan for a full minute fully submerged in the sanitizing solution, drained and laid out to dry. Some sources recommend using liquid bleach in the sanitizing water, I do not. People tend to use way too much bleach (you need only *one teaspoon* for a gallon of water) and Scouts handling liquid bleach is a recipe for disaster.

1. Pre-rinse – Full Stomachs and Empty Plates.

Everyone is responsible to bring their dishes to the wash station as free of food residue as possible (with hungry Scouts this is rarely a problem).

BEFORE you put your dirty dishes in the wash pile Scouts put a little drinking water in their bowl, cup and plate; rinse their dishes and utensils and drink that rinse water. This eliminates about 99% of the food particles that would foul the wash water.

Yuck! – that sounds gross but it's not a huge deal, makes washing up much simpler and reduces the amount of dirty water that needs to be disposed of.

2. Hot Water Wash



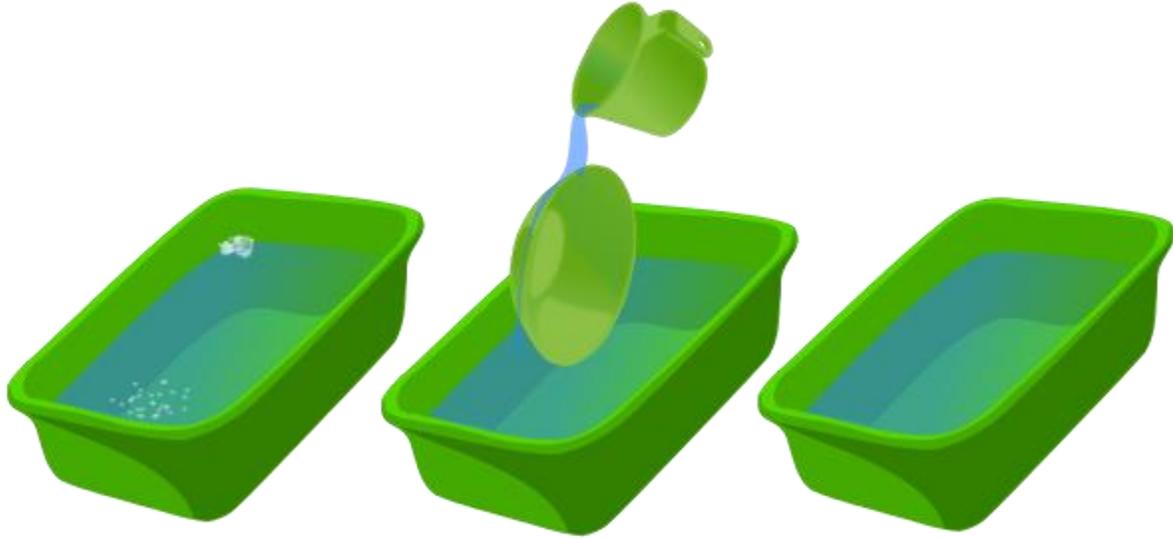
Triage – Wash the least dirty dishes first, work towards the dirtiest, and then wash your pots and pans Always save greasy pans for last The dishes go in a few at a time and are scrubbed with a dish brush. Before they head to the next step they are drained carefully to eliminate as much soapy water as possible.

Pots and Pans – Once all of the plates, bowls, cups and utensils are washed the pots and pans are next. Instead of the pots going in the dishpans some of the water from the dishpans goes into the pots, *but only enough to get them clean.*

We do not try to clean the exterior of sooty pots and pans – there’s really no need to do this, just brush off loose soot and clean the inside of the pot. A scrubbing pad may be needed, and that pad should stay in the pot- not in the dishpans. If the scrub pad gets really grubby rinse it out with some clear water.

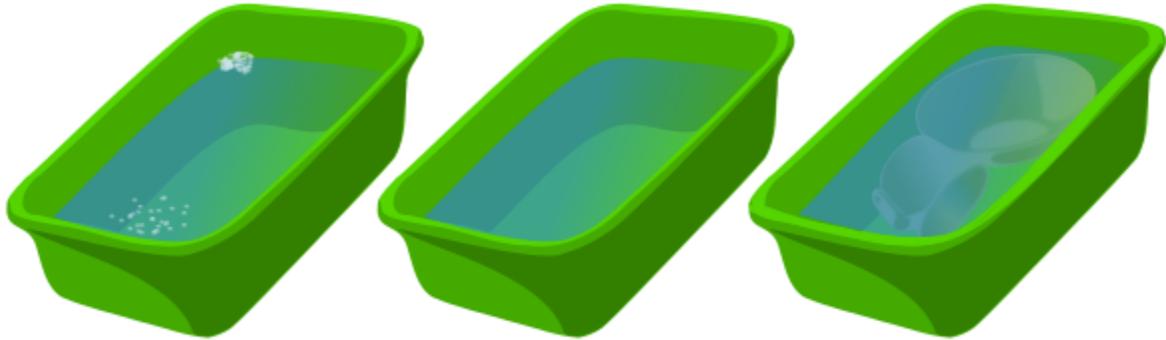
Especially greasy pots and pans need to be tested before they are rinsed – rub a finger inside the pot if there’s grease there you will feel it and you need to wash it with soapy water a second time. As *don't pour the wash water back into the dishpans*, strain it and broadcast or pour it into the sump.

3. Hot water Rinse



After the dishes are washed *and all the soapy water has been shaken off them* over the first dishpan they go in the second pan for a hot water rinse. Use a cup or bowl to pour rinse water over your dishes.

4. Sanitizing Soak



Put rinsed dishes in the third dishpan for a full minute fully submerged in the sanitizing solution, then they are drained and laid out to dry. Pots and pans go through the sanitizing step by pouring the solution in them and swishing it around to sanitize the entire inside of the pot.

Rinsing the dishpans – Strain and broadcast the soapy water in the first pan, rinse the first pan with rinse water from the second and broadcast or sump the rinse water. Pour the sanitizing water from the third pan into the rinse pan and let it stand for a minute, then transfer to the soap pan and let stand for a minute before broadcasting the sanitizing water.

Disposing of dishwater – Strain the dirty water using a kitchen strainer to remove as many food particles as possible and put the food particles in your trash. Carry dishwater and rinse water away from your camp and at least 75 steps from any streams, lakes, campsites, or trails. Give the water a good fling with a long sweeping throw to spread it over a large area. Broadcast the strained dishwater in a sunny area if possible so it will evaporate quickly, causing minimal impact.