
The Homeowner's Guide to Natural Stone Care

How to clean, protect, and preserve marble, granite, travertine, limestone, terrazzo, and slate — and how to recognize the moment a surface needs a professional.

ROSE RESTORATION

Stone & Surface Restoration · Washington DC · Maryland · Virginia · Since 1978

1. Know Your Stone

Every rule in this guide depends on one question: is your stone calcite-based or silicate-based?

Calcite-based stones — marble, limestone, travertine, onyx, and most terrazzo — react chemically with acid. A splash of lemon juice, vinegar, or wine doesn't stain them; it *dissolves* the polished surface on contact, leaving a dull mark called an etch. No sealer prevents this.

Silicate-based stones — granite, quartzite, slate, sandstone — shrug off acids but can still absorb oils and pigments, and their sealers still wear out.

STONE	FAMILY	ACID-SENSITIVE?	SCRATCHES EASILY?	MAIN RISKS
Marble	Calcite	Yes — highly	Yes	Etching, staining, dull traffic lanes
Limestone	Calcite	Yes	Yes	Etching, absorbing oils, wear
Travertine	Calcite	Yes	Yes	Etching, dirt in surface pits, fill loss
Terrazzo	Usually calcite chips	Yes (cement/ marble)	Moderate	Etching, wear paths, cracked divots
Granite	Silicate	No	Rarely	Oil stains, sealer wear, impact chips
Quartzite	Silicate	Mostly no	Rarely	Staining if unsealed; some hybrids etch
Slate	Silicate	No	Layers can flake	Efflorescence, flaking, coating buildup

Not sure what you have? In an inconspicuous corner, place one drop of white vinegar on the stone for 60 seconds, wipe, and look at an angle. A new dull spot means calcite — treat it as marble and follow every acid rule in this guide. (One drop in a hidden spot; the mark, if any, is tiny and repairable.)

2. Daily Cleaning — The Only Safe Method

Stone care is 90 percent about what you don't put on the surface.

THE SAFE ROUTINE

1. **Dust or dry-mop floors first.** Grit is sandpaper underfoot — it causes more floor wear than anything else in the house.
2. **Clean with a pH-neutral stone soap** diluted per the label, using a microfiber cloth or mop. Nothing else goes on the stone. Ever.
3. **Blot spills immediately** — especially wine, citrus, coffee, tomato, and anything fizzy. On marble, the clock is measured in seconds, not minutes.
4. **Rinse with clean water and dry** with a soft towel. Hard-water minerals left to dry become their own film.
5. **Use coasters, trivets, and mats** under everything acidic, hot, or abrasive. Boring advice; saves thousands.

THE NEVER-USE LIST

PRODUCT	WHAT IT DOES TO STONE
Vinegar & citrus cleaners	Acid — etches marble, limestone, travertine, and terrazzo on contact
Bleach	Degrades sealers, lightens some stones, pits polished surfaces over time
Ammonia & glass cleaners (Windex)	Strips sealer and dulls the polish with repeated use
CLR, lime/rust removers	Aggressive acids — among the fastest ways to destroy a marble surface
Abrasive powders & scrub pads	Scratch the finish; the haze you see later is thousands of fine scratches

"But it says safe for stone." Many all-purpose cleaners claim stone safety and are merely safe for *sealed granite*. If the label doesn't say **pH-neutral** and **marble-safe**, it doesn't touch calcite stone.

3. Etch or Stain? Diagnose Before You Treat

The most common stone-care mistake is treating an etch like a stain. They're opposites.

	STAIN	ETCH MARK
What it is	Something absorbed <i>into</i> the stone (oil, wine pigment, rust)	Surface <i>dissolved by acid</i> — physical damage to the polish
Looks like	Darker than the stone around it	Lighter / duller than the stone; often cloudy or ring-shaped
The angle test	Visible from every angle	Most visible in raking light, at an angle
Feels like	Smooth — same texture as the stone	Sometimes slightly rough or "different" under a fingertip
Treatment	Poultice draws it out (Section 4)	Professional honing and re-polishing (Section 5)
Does sealing prevent it?	Slows it down significantly	No — sealers do not stop etching

A mark can be both: red wine left overnight on marble often leaves a pigment stain *and* an etch in the same spot. The poultice removes the color; the dull mark that remains is the etch, and it needs refinishing.

Quick test: pour a little water on the mark. If it temporarily disappears while wet, it's an etch (the water fills the microscopic roughness). If it stays dark wet or dry, it's a stain.

4. Stain Removal — The Poultice

A poultice is a paste that re-absorbs a stain out of the stone. It's slow, unglamorous, and it works.

THE METHOD (ANY POULTICE)

- 1. Mix an absorbent powder (baking soda, or powdered whiting from a hardware store) with the drawing liquid for your stain type (below) to a peanut-butter consistency.
- 2. Wet the stain with distilled water first, then spread the paste ¼-inch thick, extending an inch past the stain.
- 3. Cover with plastic wrap, tape the edges, and poke two small holes.
- 4. Leave 24–48 hours, until fully dry. The drying is what pulls the stain up — don't rush it.
- 5. Scrape off gently with a plastic scraper, rinse, dry, and assess. Deep stains can take 2–3 rounds.

DRAWING LIQUID BY STAIN TYPE

STAIN	EXAMPLES	MIX THE POWDER WITH
Oil-based	Cooking oil, grease, butter, cosmetics	Acetone (ventilate well) or a few drops of clear dish soap in water
Organic	Coffee, tea, wine pigment, food, leaves	12% hydrogen peroxide (hair-developer strength)
Ink / marker	Pen, marker, dye	Hydrogen peroxide (light stone) or rubbing alcohol
Biological	Mildew spots in showers	Hydrogen peroxide — never bleach on marble
Rust	Metal furniture feet, cans, plant stands	Stop — call a professional. Rust removers are acids; on marble they trade a stain for an etch. Rust in stone is a pro job.

Know when to stop. If two poultice rounds haven't moved the stain, a third rarely will. Deep-set stains, rust, and large areas respond better to professional extraction — and poulticing a polished marble surface repeatedly can dull the spot, which then needs refinishing anyway.

5. Etch Marks — Why They're Different

An etch isn't dirt on the stone. It's a spot where the polished surface itself has been dissolved away.

That's why no cleaner removes an etch — there's nothing to clean off. Restoring the mark means physically re-fining the stone: honing away the damaged layer with progressively finer abrasives, then re-polishing until the spot matches the surrounding finish. Done right, the etch is gone without a trace. Done wrong, you get a shiny dish-shaped blemish that's more visible than the etch was — which is why this is craftsman's work, not a weekend product.

WHAT ACTUALLY PREVENTS ETCHING

- **Habits:** coasters, cutting boards, trays under bottles — acids never touch the stone.
- **Not sealers:** penetrating sealers slow *stains*; acid etches straight through them. If a product promises etch-proof marble from a bottle, put it down.
- **Protective film:** for working kitchen counters and bar tops, a professionally installed film like **Marble Armor** is the only true etch barrier — optically clear, with a 10-year manufacturer warranty against etching and staining. It's what we install for clients who love marble but actually use their kitchens.

Honed marble (matte finish) shows etching far less than polished marble — worth considering for busy kitchens during your next refinish.

6. Sealing — What It Does and Doesn't Do

A sealer is stain insurance, not armor. It buys you time to wipe up a spill — nothing more.

THE WATER TEST (60 SECONDS, TWICE A YEAR)

1. Pour a 3-inch puddle of water on the stone in a normal-use area.
2. Wait 15 minutes, wipe dry, and look.
3. **If the stone darkened** under the puddle, water is absorbing — the sealer is spent and it's time to re-seal.
4. **If it didn't darken**, the sealer is still working. Re-test in six months.

WHAT TO KNOW ABOUT SEALERS

- **Penetrating (impregnating) sealers** are the right choice for nearly all residential stone — they soak in and repel liquids without changing the look.
- **Topical coatings** (wax-like films that promise shine) are usually the wrong choice on natural stone: they scratch, yellow, trap moisture, and stripping them later is a professional project of its own.
- **Frequency:** kitchen counters roughly annually; bathrooms and floors every 1–3 years depending on traffic — but the water test beats any calendar.
- **Professional application matters most on floors:** large areas seal evenly only with the right applicators and timing; blotchy DIY sealing on a big floor is a common call we get.

Remember: a freshly sealed marble counter still etches the moment lemon juice hits it. Sealing addresses *staining*. Etching is prevented by habits or film (Section 5), and repaired by refinishing.

7. Signs the Surface Needs a Professional

Good home care keeps stone healthy. It can't reverse wear — that's a refinishing job, and catching it early makes it smaller.

CALL WHEN YOU SEE

- **Dull traffic lanes** — pathways and thresholds losing their reflection while the edges of the room stay glossy.
- **Widespread etching or "water spots"** on counters and vanities that no cleaner touches.
- **Scratches you can feel** with a fingernail, or a hazy finish from years of fine scratching.
- **Chips, cracks, or hollow-sounding tiles** — structural issues that grow if ignored.
- **Lippage** — tile edges sitting higher than their neighbors, catching light (and toes).
- **Stains that survived two poultice rounds**, or any rust stain.
- **A previous coating failing** — peeling, yellowing, or flaking films from an earlier "quick fix."
- **Grout and caulk problems** — cracked, moldy, or missing lines around showers and floors.

WHAT A PROFESSIONAL RESTORATION INVOLVES

Diamond honing to remove the damaged layer, crack and chip repair, re-polishing to your chosen finish, and sealing — returning the stone to its installation-day surface, usually in a day or two. It's also a fraction of what replacement costs: restoring a marble floor typically runs a small percentage of the \$50–\$125+ per square foot that demolition, fabrication, and new installation would.

The fastest answer is a photo. Send a picture of the surface to Rose Restoration and we'll tell you honestly — a care issue you can handle with this guide, or a refinishing job — usually the same day.
roserestoration.com/send-photos

8. The Maintenance Schedule

Put these on the calendar and your stone will outlive the house.

WHEN	WHAT
Daily	Blot spills immediately; use coasters and trivets; dry shower stone with a squeegee or towel
Weekly	Dust-mop floors; clean surfaces with pH-neutral stone soap; dry — don't air-dry
Monthly	Inspect counters in raking light for new etches or stains; check caulk lines in wet areas; shake out or vacuum entry mats
Twice a year	Water test (Section 6) on kitchen counters, vanities, and one floor area; treat any fresh stains with a poultice while they're young
Annually	Re-seal surfaces that failed the water test; professional deep clean for textured stone and grout; walk the house for chips, cracks, and lippage
Every 3–7 years	Professional re-polish of high-traffic marble and terrazzo floors — before the wear gets deep, while the job is still small

FOR BUSY HOUSEHOLDS

If the schedule above is one more thing you'll never get to, that's what a maintenance program is for — scheduled professional care that keeps every stone surface at standard year-round. Ask us about residential maintenance plans.

About Rose Restoration

We restore what others replace.

Since 1978, Rose Restoration has restored the marble, terrazzo, concrete, wood, and metal surfaces of the DC region's most demanding buildings — five-star hotels, federal landmarks, and the area's finest homes. Our 30+ full-time technicians (no subcontractors) handle everything from a single etched countertop to a full lobby restoration, backed by a 1-year written workmanship warranty.

RESIDENTIAL SERVICES

- Marble, granite, travertine, limestone & terrazzo restoration — floors, counters, showers, fireplaces
- Etch, stain, chip, and crack repair
- Marble Armor protective film — 10-year manufacturer warranty against etching and staining
- Grout & caulk restoration, bathroom caulking replacement
- Wood, metal, and concrete refinishing
- Residential maintenance programs

Get an Honest Opinion on Your Stone

Send photos: roserestoration.com/send-photos

Call: (703) 327-7676

Photo quotes usually answered the same day. Free on-site assessments across Washington DC, Maryland, and Northern Virginia. · info@roserestoration.com

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