How to Clean Cast Iron and Burnt Pots

Bring back the non-stick seasoning on cast iron, and lift burnt-on food from stainless steel — without harsh chemicals or damage.

Quick facts: Everyday cast iron clean: 5–10 minutes | Burnt pots: 20–40

minutes | Difficulty: Easy | Cost: Pantry basics

What You Need

- Hot water and mild dish soap
- Coarse salt (2–3 tablespoons for burnt cast iron)
- Baking soda (2–3 tablespoons for burnt stainless steel)
- White vinegar (1 cup, stainless steel only)
- Neutral cooking oil, e.g. vegetable or grapeseed oil (about 1 teaspoon per seasoning)
- Non-metal scrub pad or stiff brush, paper towels or a clean cloth
- Stove, oven and oven gloves

Everyday Cast Iron Clean

1. **Clean while warm.** Wash the skillet while it is still warm (not hot) with hot water and a little dish soap, using a non-metal scrub pad.
2. **Rinse and dry on the stove.** Rinse, then place the skillet on the stove over low heat for 2–3 minutes until all water has evaporated.
3. **Oil lightly.** Rub in about 1 teaspoon of oil with a paper towel, then wipe it almost dry — the surface should look dry, not greasy. Too much oil turns sticky.
4. **Store dry.** Put the skillet away only when fully cool and dry. Never store it damp or stacked with wet pans.

Seasoning a Clean Skillet

If food starts to stick or the surface looks dull and patchy, re-season: rub a very thin layer of oil over the whole skillet (inside and out), wipe almost dry, then heat upside down in the oven at 230 °C / 450 °F for 60 minutes. Let it cool in the oven. Repeat 2–3 times for a strong new layer.

Burnt Cast Iron — Salt Simmer Method

1. Sprinkle 2–3 tablespoons of coarse salt over the burnt area and add just enough hot water to cover it.
2. Simmer on the stove for 5–10 minutes, then let it cool slightly.
3. Scrub gently, rinse, then dry on the stove for 2–3 minutes and oil lightly (about 1 teaspoon, wiped almost dry).

Burnt Stainless Steel — Baking Soda Simmer

1. Add 2–3 tablespoons of baking soda and enough water to cover the burnt area, then simmer for 15–30 minutes.
2. Once cool, scrub gently, rinse and dry. Repeat once for stubborn marks rather than scrubbing harder.

Burnt Stainless Steel — Vinegar Method (Stainless Only)

1. Pour in 1 cup of water and 1 cup of white vinegar and bring to a gentle simmer for a few minutes.
2. Once cool, add 2 tablespoons of baking soda, let it fizz, then scrub, rinse and dry.
3. **Never use the vinegar method on cast iron** — vinegar strips seasoning and can damage the surface.

Rusty Skillet Rescue

1. Scrub off loose rust with a non-metal pad and hot soapy water.
2. For heavy rust, soak in undiluted white vinegar for 1–3 hours maximum — longer can pit the iron.
3. Rinse well, scrub again, then dry immediately on the stove (2–3 minutes).
4. Re-season at 230 °C / 450 °F for 60 minutes, and repeat the seasoning layer 3 times for a full restore.

Safety warnings: Never put cast iron in the dishwasher and never soak it for

long — water causes rust. Never use steel wool on non-stick or enamel pans.

Replace non-stick pans once the coating is peeling.

Tick-Off Checklist

- ☐ Skillet cleaned while warm, with hot water and a little dish soap
- ☐ Dried on the stove for 2–3 minutes until all water evaporated
- ☐ About 1 teaspoon of oil rubbed in and wiped almost dry
- ☐ Burnt cast iron: 2–3 tablespoons coarse salt + hot water, simmered 5–10 minutes
- ☐ Burnt stainless steel: 2–3 tablespoons baking soda, simmered 15–30 minutes
- ☐ Vinegar method used on stainless steel only (1 cup water + 1 cup vinegar)
- ☐ Rusty skillet: vinegar soak kept to 1–3 hours maximum
- ☐ Re-seasoned at 230 °C / 450 °F for 60 minutes (x3 for rusty skillets)
- ☐ No dishwasher, no long soak for cast iron
- ☐ No steel wool on non-stick or enamel; peeling non-stick replaced
- ☐ Skillet stored completely dry

Do and Do Not

Do:

- Clean while warm
- Dry on the stove every time
- Oil thinly, wiped almost dry
- Use wooden or silicone tools

Do Not:

- Soak cast iron
- Use the dishwasher for cast iron
- Use vinegar on cast iron
- Use steel wool on coated pans

Notes