If your boat smells - there is a reason
Odors come from many sources in boats. You can use an amazing array of products designed to cover up the smell, but not necessarily eliminate it. These may work great, but if you don't find the culprit and eliminate the source, it will reappear. Worse, if not rectified fairly quickly, the smells can permeate the upholstery and wood inside the boat and remain for long periods of time.

The odor you smell can actually help you identify the source!

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of odor</th>
<th>Can indicate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Fresh sanitation odor | Check for sanitation hose leaks  
|                     | Check for permeated hoses  
| Older sanitation odors | **NOTE:** the smell of a permeated hose is completely different than the smell of leaky waste - so find the source  
| Cheese             | If you smell a cheese like odor, check your bilge - you may have a shower leak. It will look like mozzarella cheese like substance in your bilge (from hair, soap and sweat)  
| Rotten eggs        | The smell of rotten eggs may indicate an a/c condensation drain problem. The odor of decay comes from the tree spores that are rotting in the bilge if the bilge water is not flushed overboard.  
| Raw diesel         | If you smell raw diesel in your boat, you have a leak in your fuel system and you must find the source and repair it.  

That said, keep in mind that the most common sources of boat odors are the head, sanitation hoses, holding tank and bilge but they can also come from ice boxes, refrigerators, cupboards, and leaks (obvious or hidden) on the boat.

**1. Sanitation system**
Start with the sanitation system. Since we did an email article about sanitation odors in February, just [click here](#) to read this article about the causes and cures of sanitation odors.
2. Ventilation
Lack of ventilation is often a culprit of odors and nothing kills off smell like ventilation. Forced ventilation (solar powered fans, one in one out) are not hard to do, not that expensive and will make a big difference. Try using two solar day/night fans...one on draw in, and one set to exhaust. You can tell the difference between a solar vent working or not immediately when you open the hatch. Note: use the boat! Any boat that is locked up will get a smell.

3. Bilges
Freshening bilges is tricky. Saltwater rotting in the bilge can contribute to odors. Even though the bilge is mostly dry, it’s possible that some water made its way into the bilge or grease, oil, diesel or gasoline may have dripped into the bilge at some point - creating some very unpleasant odors. This combination will result in sludge building up on the inside of the hull which can foster mold and mildew.

In addition, on most modern boats the bilge is not completely accessible. Bulk heads and stringers are often covered by the sole of the boat and the only access is through limber holes designed to let water drain over the length of the boat. For boats with a deep bilge (full keels and some fin keels), there may be a long term buildup of sludge down there as well. If the boat has hard-to-reach places like that it means hard-to-clean and over time it will build up an unpleasant smell. Soak down those areas with cleaner and try to get as much as you can.

To clean and freshen the bilge, pour a grease cutting bilge cleaner (like Orbilge bilge cleaner) into the bilge along with a bucket or two of water. Additional tip: try to take your boat out, so the cleaner will loosen and wash sludge, mold and mildew from the bilge. When back at dock, pump out the liquid for disposal on shore.

4. Refrigerator and cabinets
Other odors can be related to the galley. Food that has slipped behind a cupboard drawer and is fermenting can smell up a boat as much as the head. Wash the refrigerator, ice boxes, live wells and the inside of the cupboards. Pull all the drawers out and inspect behind and below them for any refuse.

5. Engine
Another source of odor is from the engine. Petrochemicals create distinctive odors that can be removed by restoratively cleaning leaky, soiled contaminated bilges and engine rooms. If it’s greasy, it can be washed with a grease cutting cleaner or pressure washing equipment.

Don’t just clean off a current problem - this is may be a hint that something needs attention. Find and fix the source of the odor, (a leaky oil gasket, a loose hose clamp or engine failure of some sort). If you have an exhaust leak or blow by then get your mechanic to address these issues. But you also need to get all the engine oil and fuel off of the outside of the engine as it will out-gas whenever the engine gets warm.

One other tip: you may not realize how much the engine blower can keep engine smells out of the boat. Run the blower for 5-10 minutes when running the boat and for about 5-10 min after shutting down. Have you wondered why a diesel might have a blower...now you know!

Wait - there’s more....
Mildew and smoke odors can permeate upholstery and carpets. When was the last time you cleaned and dried your chain/rode anchor locker? Also, wood boats and sails can all have odor causing challenges.

8. Mold/Mildew and Smoke Odors
Mildew and smoke odors can permeate upholstery, linens and carpets on your boat. Getting rid of these odors is easy, but you have to know what to look for, where to look for it, how to remove it AND how to prevent it. With new long lasting odor technology you can be proactive in preventing the spread of staining and odor caused by mold, mildew, fungi, or smoke odors in your boat. Reactive cleaning procedures are usually much more time consuming and of course more expensive.

Mildew grows when there is a food source, humidity or moisture, lack of air movement and lack of direct sunlight. Some control of moisture can be accomplished using a dehumidifier (kept on a timer to prevent icing of the coil) or calcium chloride crystals bags, but these rarely fully stop microbial growth. Most chemical antimicrobial cleaners can remove 99.9 % of mold and mildew if surface is cleaned properly.

If you already have the mildew smell, thoroughly clean all hard and soft surfaces and then control and protect the environment afterwards. Upholstery and carpet can be shampooped. Walls, bulkheads, headliners (most) and linens can be washed.

Smoke odors require specific penetrating cleaning processes like the use of expensive ozone machines to neutralize odor molecules. Too often cleaning, maintenance and protection is postponed so that sun and fun activities can be
maximized. We all know that controlling the environment inside a boat after it has been stored, not used or winterized is difficult, and running electric dehumidification is not always possible.

**So what can you do?**
Treating surfaces with preventative coatings to remove odors and inhibit the multiplication of its sources can be done. There are several companies that make products that can be used to control mildew odors and their sources.

**9. The chain/rode locker**
This locker gets smelly muddy yucky every time the anchor goes up, and the smell can easily make it's way into the boat. Taking everything out, wiping the locker down with a cleaning solution and air drying it every so often will do wonders. While we are on the topic- clean and dry your lazarettes as well.

**10. Sails**
Rinse and dry your sails annually to help keep the salt off the sails and sea smell out of the forepeak. After ocean passages and otherwise at the end of season on the Chesapeake, rinse and dry the forepeak and cabin interior and inside of all lockers with fresh water. Also rinse running rigging kept below - this helps get rid of salt.

**11. Wood boats**
If you’re looking at a wood boat or one with a wood interior you can come across that semi-sweet musty beer like smell of dry rot. There is no cure other than to remove the rotting wood - period. Wood boat - dry rot (you’ll know it as soon as you smell it)