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Ask Martha

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ELIZABETH THELEN

Ask Martha

Dear Martha,
What exactly is mildew? What causes it?
How can I prevent it from growing? And what
can I do to eradicate it from my home?
—*Martha Stewart Living* magazine

Dear Reader,
Mildew is your punishment
for not being the woman
you should be. That bit of black
plating your grout, stains starting
in the shower curtain—all
your inadequacies turned fungal
and growing. Compare yourself

to your mother, your sister-in-law,
the rest of the world's
competent ladies. Sweet Reader,
how do you measure up? I know
you disinfected the trashcan
last week, but I can see

the cat-hair dustballs
tumbleweeding around
your kitchen. Now take me.
The master bath in my
Connecticut home smells
of hibiscus and lavender, with
a friendly spike of citrus
365 days a year. You could
drink from that toilet. But

Reader, all this is not to worry you.
Just pick a day, early autumn,
when the view out your hall window
is a simple matter of yellows
and greens. Wear jeans,
a comfortable plaid
shirt and clean tennis shoes,
and snug your hair up into
a loose bun. I like to put on

a little music, something
baroque, something lighthearted
and energetic. And if the water's
warm enough, the sponge
soft enough, you might imagine
you're scrubbing—not your almond
fiberglass shower with its months
of family grime—but a woman's

porcelain skin. It's me, oh, Reader,
my skin is your ivory tub, claw-
footed and classic. And my
perfect brass ribbon-twists
labeled Hot, Cold, and Drain
will be gleaming soon enough,
thanks to you.