Stucco and EIFS look similar from the curb, yet they behave very differently when you try to clean them. In the Upstate, where spring pollen paints everything yellow, summer humidity keeps algae active, and red clay splashes high on walls after afternoon storms, these finishes can go from crisp to grimy in a single season. The answer is rarely brute force. Good results come from understanding the material, reading the stains, and matching technique to the system. I have seen both finishes look five years younger with a careful wash, and I have also seen one hasty blast with the wrong tip punch a trench right through an EIFS lamina. The margin between fresh and damaged is surprisingly thin.

This guide explains how to care for stucco and EIFS walls with cleaning methods that respect their construction. It also threads in local realities of pressure washing in greenville sc, where climate and soils set the stage for what you will face on the wall.

What you are cleaning: stucco versus EIFS

Traditional stucco is a cementitious cladding. It has base coats of Portland cement and sand over metal lath or a solid substrate, then a thin color coat. It is tough, porous, and heavy. If you tap it, it sounds solid. It absorbs water, then dries outward if the wall assembly is detailed well with a drainage plane and weep screed. Cracks telegraph movement or substrate issues. Because it is porous, stains often live partially inside the finish.

EIFS, or Exterior Insulation and Finish System, is different. It is light and layered: foam insulation adhered or mechanically fastened to the wall, a polymer base coat with mesh, and a thin acrylic finish coat. Modern EIFS include drainage, carolina pressure washers which is essential in a humid climate, but that thin acrylic lamina does most of the work at the surface. If you dig through it with pressure, you can expose foam and create a path for water. EIFS is less forgiving of aggressive cleaning and more sensitive at penetrations and terminations.

If you are unsure which system you have, look at details. A weep screed at the base and a solid, gritty feel often points to stucco. EIFS usually has softer corners, uniform texture, and foam reveals visible at window returns. The knuckle rap test helps too. EIFS sounds hollow compared to stucco.

What Greenville’s climate does to these surfaces

The Upstate sits in a zone where summers are long and wet enough to feed algae, but winters still throw in freeze events that stress coatings. Trees shed pollen that clings to textured surfaces. Red clay splashes onto lower courses and can stain both cementitious and acrylic finishes, though acrylic finishes often hold the color more stubbornly. Afternoon wind can drive rain under soffits and around returns, keeping north and east façades damp after storms.

I see three main staining cycles in pressure washing greenville sc:

- A green to black biofilm that sets up on the shaded sides, starting as light green sheen, then turning blotchy, then almost black in areas that never get sun.
- Oxidized pollen that adheres in a thin, waxy layer each spring. It looks like a uniform yellow dust at first, then darkens where it mixes with airborne oils and soot.
- Red clay splash and iron bleed near hose bibs, irrigation, and rusty fasteners. The clay binds differently to acrylic versus mineral surfaces, so solutions vary.

Efflorescence shows up on stucco more than EIFS because of cement chemistry and water migration. It appears as a white, crusty bloom after prolonged wetting. Aggressive washing rarely fixes it. You must reduce moisture and dissolve the salts carefully.

The risks of turning up the pressure

A pressure washer does two things at once: it delivers water and it delivers kinetic energy. On EIFS, that energy can bruise or cut the acrylic lamina in a split second. On stucco, energy can drive water deep into cracks or under weak paint. Neither outcome helps you.

When people ask for a number, I give ranges and caveats. On EIFS, I rarely exceed 300 to 600 psi at the wall, and only with a wide fan tip or a soft washing setup that relies on chemistry more than force. On stucco, 800 to 1200 psi is often safe for rinsing, but I adjust to the finish, the age, and the paint. If there is a high build elastomeric, it can peel like a banana if you get under it. Distance matters as much as pressure. Twelve to twenty four inches off the surface feels slow, yet it keeps you out of the danger zone. Work at oblique angles so the jet glances off rather than drives straight in.

The numbers on the machine do not tell the whole story. A 4 gpm unit at 1000 psi pushes more water than a 2 gpm unit at the same pressure, which means more potential water loading in the wall. Flow can soak what pressure cannot damage. This is particularly relevant when you are working above kickout flashing or into suspect sealant joints.

A short pre-wash checklist that prevents expensive lessons

- Identify the system: stucco or EIFS, and note any repairs or patches.
- Walk the envelope, mark failed sealant, missing kickout flashing, open joints, and soft spots.
- Test a small, inconspicuous area with your planned setup, then adjust pressure, tip, and chemistry.
- Protect plants, electrical, and gas meters, and divert runoff away from porous soil beds.
- Verify weather: no freezing overnight, light winds, and no heavy rain within 12 hours.

Five minutes here saves hours of repair. I have found hidden rot at a window return just by running a finger along the sealant. If it crumbles, postpone cleaning, fix the joint, then come back. Water under pressure finds every shortcut into a wall.

Techniques that respect the materials

On EIFS, think soft washing. Apply the right cleaning solution with low pressure, let it work, then rinse gently. A 40 to 60 degree fan tip helps spread flow, and using a downstream injector or dedicated pump sprayer keeps delivery under control. If you must agitate, use a soft brush with a long handle, not a spinner tip. Keep the wand moving and your body positioned so you do not point water up into lap joints or behind fixtures.

Stucco tolerates more physical cleaning, but the same principle applies. Start with chemistry that dissolves or lifts the stain. Rinse with measured passes, bottom to top for application on vertical walls when applying detergents, then top to bottom for rinsing so you do not streak dirty solution down clean areas. Avoid tight, close-in circles that create tiger striping. Wide, overlapping sweeps at steady speed yield an even finish.

Never chase a crack with a jet. If you discover a hairline crack during washing, reduce pressure and brush that zone instead. For wider cracks, stop and mark them for repair after the wall dries. For EIFS, anything that looks like a gouge in the lamina is a hard stop. Patch first.

Detergents that work, and those that do harm

Most wall grime in Greenville is biological. A dilute sodium hypochlorite solution, **pressure washing greenville sc** 0.5 to 1 percent available chlorine at the wall, knocks out algae and mildew without stripping acrylic finishes when used correctly. Pair it with a surfactant that helps the solution cling to textured surfaces, and it can cut dwell time in half. Rinse thoroughly. On EIFS, keep dwell short and avoid letting solution dry on the surface.

For pollen films, a mild alkaline cleaner with surfactants, followed by a low pressure rinse, works well. Hypochlorite alone can leave the waxy binder in place, which shows up as faint streaks after drying. A gentle brush pass breaks the surface tension.

Red clay is stubborn. Oxalic or citric acid based cleaners, used at low concentrations and spot tested, lift iron and clay pigments. Do not jump to strong acids on EIFS. They can dull acrylic finishes or etch protective coats. On stucco, a light acid wash can brighten mineral finishes, but ventilate and neutralize as needed. I will not use hydrochloric acid on EIFS, and I avoid it on painted stucco.

Efflorescence is chemistry, not dirt. Water alone can make it look better for a day, then it returns. Use a dedicated efflorescence remover that dissolves salts without attacking the finish, and work dry in, wet out. Most products want the surface dry for penetration and short dwell, then a controlled rinse. If efflorescence persists, address moisture sources: sprinklers wetting the wall, clogged weep screeds, or grade too high.

Rust streaks beneath metal fixtures respond to oxalic acid gels. Apply a small amount with a brush, short dwell, then rinse gently. If the source remains, the stain returns.

Pressure, tips, and distance, in real numbers

If you like concrete settings, here is a balanced starting point for most residential work:

- EIFS: 40 to 60 degree fan, downstream applied detergent at 0.5 to 1 percent sodium hypochlorite with surfactant, keep working pressure at or below 400 psi at the wall, 18 to 24 inches away. Rinse with garden hose pressure or low machine pressure. Avoid turbo tips entirely.
- Stucco: 25 to 40 degree fan, detergent as needed for stain type, rinse at 800 to 1200 psi, 12 to 18 inches away. Nozzle movement should be slow enough that you see the sheet of water chase the previous pass by about a third overlap.

Machines vary, and hoses rob pressure. Always verify with a gauge at the gun if you are making a habit of this work. What reads 1000 psi at the pump can be hundreds less after 100 feet of hose, which is good for safety but confusing when you troubleshoot.

Hot water helps for oily residues, yet it also accelerates chemical reactions and can soften some acrylics. I use warm, not hot, water on EIFS, and only when needed.

Protecting joints, flashings, and penetrations

On both systems, the weak points are the joints and terminations. Sealant around windows and doors hardens, then pulls away as buildings move. Flashings that kick roof runoff into gutters sometimes sit too short, and water streaks down the wall. Light fixtures and hose bibs often seal poorly. During washing, any of these can admit water under pressure.

Before cleaning, look low at the weep screed on stucco. It should be clear of soil so moisture can exit. If grade or mulch covers it, scrape the area back. On EIFS, look for drainage slots or weeps at base details. Do not aim water up into them. Clean them gently, then let gravity work.

At penetrations, tape plastic loosely over fixtures so you can clean around them without soaking the junction. Do not trap water behind tight plastic against EIFS for long periods. Pull coverings as soon as you finish the area so the wall can dry.

Safety, access, and the fall hazards people forget

Stucco and EIFS usually need work on ladders or lifts because textured finishes hide grime until you step back, then it is everywhere. Ladders on soft soil sink and shift. A scaffold plank on two sturdy ladders with a ladder jack can stabilize your stance, but inspect everything. The temptation to stretch one more foot with a wand in hand causes more near falls than any other move I see.

Electric service masts, meter bases, and open soffit vents deserve respect. Water and electricity do not mix, and EIFS soffits can hide wiring behind a thin lamina. Keep a dry zone around service equipment and plan your hose runs so you do not trip with a wand in hand.

Personal protective equipment helps. Eye protection is not optional when you spray overhead. Chemical resistant gloves keep hypochlorite from finding that small cut on your knuckle. If you use strong cleaners, respirators with appropriate cartridges make the day end without a headache.

Environmental practices that keep you on the right side of the rules

Greenville and most Upstate jurisdictions follow stormwater ordinances that prohibit discharging pollutants into storm drains. That includes bleach solutions and sediment laden wash water. You do not need to memorize statutes to act responsibly. Use simple best practices.

Plug or divert nearby storm inlets during washing. Pre-wet plants and soils, then rinse again after contact with cleaning solutions to dilute. Catch concentrated runoff at the base of walls with berms or sand snakes and direct it onto lawns that can absorb it. If a job produces significant wash water with visible solids or detergents, consider pump-out to sanitary sewer with permission, or use a reclamation vac. For many residential washes, the volume is modest, and dilution on site is effective if you plan the sequence and shut off sprinklers for a day.

Avoid washing right before a thunderstorm. Aside from streaks, a downpour carries your solutions straight to the curb before they can dilute or neutralize.

Timing and weather windows

Stains lift faster on a warm surface, yet not in full direct sun at midday in July. Solutions dry before they work, and you chase shadows all morning. Early starts help. Work the east face first, then rotate as the sun moves. In winter, give walls time to warm above freezing before you start, and make sure temperatures stay above 35 to 40 degrees overnight so residual moisture does not freeze in microcracks. Greenville winters are short, but a surprise cold snap can undo a nice clean with a spidery pattern of freeze cracks on fresh paint.

Routine maintenance that pays back

Stucco and EIFS look best and last longest with light, regular care rather than heroic deep cleans. A gentle wash every 12 to 24 months in Greenville’s climate keeps biofilm thin and easier to remove. After severe pollen seasons, a quick low pressure rinse can reset the surface before pollen binds to oils and dust. Every few years, inspect and refresh sealants. On stucco, hairline cracks may need elastomeric coatings to bridge movement. On EIFS, follow the manufacturer’s sealant and caulk recommendations so the chemistry matches the acrylic finish.

Painted stucco benefits from high quality acrylic coatings with good dirt pickup resistance. Cheap paint chalks quicker, then collects grime. EIFS finishes can be topcoated with compatible acrylics if they fade, but always follow system guidelines. Adding a breathable, hydrophobic clear coat is an option on some stucco finishes to slow water absorption, but test first for appearance and compatibility.

What can go wrong, even with care

I have watched well meaning homeowners wash striped shadows into a wall by moving too fast, then spend hours reblending. I have seen a new EIFS house scarred by a 15 degree tip at close range when someone tried to erase a clay splash. I have documented water intrusion from a missing kickout flashing that a wash turned into a wet interior corner because the stream drove water under the siding above.

Other pitfalls show up later. Aggressive hypochlorite use without neutralization can brown surrounding plants overnight. Acid used to chase clay can etch metal rails below. High pressure used to rinse an upper course can lift soffit paint and blow fines into attic vents. Most of these are avoidable with lower force, better aim, and patience.

When hiring a pro makes sense, and what to ask in Greenville

If you are weighing DIY versus calling a crew, consider height, complexity, and the age of your cladding. Multi-story EIFS with lots of window returns and sealant joints is not a good first project. A reputable contractor who understands soft washing and low pressure approaches will bring metered chemical delivery, long-reach poles, and recovery options for runoff. Ask to see their tips and meters, not just a brochure. If they recommend a turbo nozzle on EIFS, keep looking.

Costs in the Greenville market range widely by access and scope. A single story stucco ranch might run 0.25 to 0.50 dollars per square foot of wall area for a light wash. EIFS with intricate details, balconies, or access with a lift can reach 0.60 to 1.25 dollars per square foot. Stain specific treatments, such as rust removal or efflorescence mitigation, price separately by the hour or by the area. These are ballpark ranges, not quotes. Good contractors will walk your property, note defects, and provide a written plan that includes protection, chemistry, and post-wash inspection.

If you search for pressure washing greenville sc, you will see a mix of generalists and outfits that mention EIFS and stucco care specifically. Favor crews that talk about low pressure methods, drainage considerations, and sealant protection. Ask for references with projects similar to your cladding type, not just vinyl siding cleans.

A simple signpost list: call a professional if you see

- Spongy or soft spots on EIFS when you press gently.
- Long vertical cracks through stucco that widen and narrow along the run.
- Stains that look like rust bleeding from window heads or fasteners.

- Efflorescence that returns after a light rinse.
- Missing or failed sealant around windows and doors.

These conditions point to underlying issues that cleaning alone will not resolve, or places where washing can make problems worse. A pro can stage repairs and cleaning in the right order.

A field-tested workflow for a careful clean

Start by staging. Move furniture, wet plants, and set containment where runoff could reach hardscape that you want to protect. Mix your solution fresh, test it on a small area behind a shrub or at the back corner. Watch for color change, chalk release, or dulling. Adjust concentration down if you see a rapid change in gloss or texture.

Work one elevation at a time. Apply detergent bottom to top on vertical walls so the chemistry does not run and streak. Give it time, usually a few minutes, then start a gentle brush pass on visible growth or pollen. Rinse from the top down so you move clean water ahead of the dirty sheet. On EIFS, keep the brush strokes light. The goal is to break surface tension, not scrub the finish.

Pause after each elevation. Step back while the surface is damp. Streaks show while wet. If you miss them, they set and you have to rewet the whole area. Check protected pockets around fixtures and eaves where solution can linger, then rinse those nooks again.

As you wrap up, pull any protective coverings, open weep areas, and let the wall breathe. Walk the base. If runoff reached a bed, soak that soil again with clean water. Return in 24 hours to inspect after it dries fully. Some faint marks only reveal once the wall is dry, especially pollen ghosts on light colors. Touch up those zones with a targeted second pass rather than repeating the entire wall.

Local details that often get overlooked

Greenville’s red clay is tough on EIFS near grade. If your EIFS finish runs too close to the soil or patio, you will fight stains until you adjust grade or add a splash band. A two to three inch clearance helps, more if mulch drifts in storms. On stucco, make sure the weep screed at the base is visible. If landscapers keep burying it with mulch, councils of best practice will not save you from trapped moisture.

Irrigation overspray is another silent culprit. A rotor that sweeps a wall every morning can produce algae bands and efflorescence in a season. Adjust heads, install drip near the base, and you remove the trigger for half your stains.

Finally, Greenville’s sudden downpours mean roof to wall details matter. Kickout flashing at the base of every roof return into a wall is small metal with big impact. If you do not have it, water runs down the cladding, gets behind coating layers, and stains or rots what it finds. No amount of careful washing fixes that. Add the flashing, then clean.

A word on repainting after washing

If you plan to paint stucco or topcoat EIFS, schedule washing at least three to seven days before coatings, longer in cool or humid weather. Texture holds water. Paint trapped moisture and you get blisters or extended cure times. On stucco, pH matters after any acid cleaning. Rinse thoroughly and allow the surface to stabilize. Painters should perform moisture checks and pH tests, then choose breathable, high quality

acrylics that resist dirt pickup. On EIFS, only use manufacturer approved coatings. Some elastomerics can bridge hairline cracks on stucco, but they trap moisture if misapplied on EIFS.

The bottom line

Careful cleaning protects both appearance and building health. Pressure is a blunt instrument that can help or hurt in seconds. In Greenville’s mix of heat, humidity, storms, and clay, a soft washing mindset, tuned chemistry, and an eye for building details produce better results than raw force. Know your cladding, read the stains, and give the wall a way to dry. If the scope feels beyond your reach, search for pressure washing in greenville sc and look for teams that talk about system types, drainage, and low pressure methods. The right approach keeps stucco crisp and EIFS intact, and it avoids the kind of damage that costs more than any wash ever should.