

Tales from the Crawlspace

By: Scott Harris

Propertyexam

RAINY WEATHER MAINTENANCE

We've rounded the corner, sliding through fall with the grey bearded face of winter looming at us. The rain has come and as we all know, there will be plenty of it. There are some things that are best done or analyzed when it's raining. Now is the best time to get after them. Other things, well some of us might be a little bit behind and it's really important to get after winter maintenance issues as soon as possible. Water is the single most destructive element to a home and here in the great Pacific Northwest, we get plenty to say the least.

So, it's raining, really raining, that's good the harder the better. Put on your boots, long raincoat & hat. I like to wear a wide brimmed hat when I'm working outside in the rain. It keeps the rain from splattering on my face and makes me feel more impervious to the weather. We're going to spend a little time outside so really, dress to be comfortable so you don't rush it. Take a notebook in your pocket or a digital camera if you like. Step back away from the house, start in the front, go all around and just look at it. See how the water runs down the face of your roof and valleys. Watch the water running down all the way to the gutters. Be careful to notice if there is anywhere the water overflows the gutters or runs down, onto the siding of the house. If there is, these areas need to be fixed, "pronto". At this time a working gutter and downspout system is the most important thing you probably own. The gutters and overall drainage system protects the structure from destructive water. The gutters not only protect the building envelope from destructive water but they keep all that water from setting against the foundation and (if properly designed) direct the flow of water away from the foundation keeping it dry. Most moisture intrusion problems I find in crawlspaces and basements are the direct result of faulty gutter/downspout systems, not area drainage or grading. Even if you cleaned your gutters early, they may not all be working correctly. If they are not sloped correct, they won't

work correctly. They may leak and need seal caulking inside to keep them from leaking and dumping water all over the house. Many houses have some kind of “leaf guard” system. Most of them don’t really work all that well. During the fall all our beautiful deciduous trees get rid of their leaves for the winter and grow new ones in the spring. All the leaves, pine needles, and assorted debris lands on the roof. The process isn’t over yet and all that debris can clog your gutters. If you have a screen or cover type leaf guard system, they plug the screen or cover it and the rainwater just flows over the top, down the eaves and onto the house cladding. This completely defeats the purpose of the gutter system and is quite damaging to the house. These things will need to be cleaned off or out and this will probably need to be done several times until there are no more leaves and debris falling onto the roof. GOOD NEWS! By December or so, if you’ve gotten them cleaned out and flowing, you are probably “cool” till next year! The flow will keep it “flushed”. Be sure and check the downspouts, you should see a good flow of water going through them. If the downspouts are backing up the obstruction needs to be cleared. The downspouts should discharge into an area drain below ground or have splash blocks or “leaders” that take the water at least 36” away from the house. No, I’m not kidding get that water away from the house. By the time spring comes there could be literally thousands of gallons of water flow through that downspout, get it away from your house.

If you see any area where water is setting near the foundation, it must be corrected. This may be a grading issue or something smaller that can be re-directed. If you are unable to determine the exact cause, consult with a landscaper, grading contractor or your friendly neighborhood home inspector. If the drainage problems are too great to tackle before dryer weather is with us again, you may be able to “stem the tide” with the use of sandbags available at your local hardware or building supply.

Lots of folks seem to think that covering the vents to their homes in the winter will save them energy. NONSENSE! This is a damaging and potentially destructive practice. If your crawlspace foundation vents are below surface level, they need to have wet wells installed around them.

The crawlspace vents are there to provide circulation and allow moisture to evaporate and escape. If they are closed off, moisture will be trapped in the crawlspace, keeping it damp and make it a breeding ground for wood destroying organisms and other moisture damage. Keep the vents open; don't allow water to flow into them.

More items to look for this time of year:

- Cut back vegetation that grows too close to the structure. Rule of thumb, 12" at least. This can hold water against the building.
- Check trees in the yard and remove dead branches that can fall.
- Make sure the door mats are in good condition, get everyone into the habit of taking off their shoes or wiping their feet well before coming inside. Wet, muddy floors are slippery.
- Varnish wooden doors or seal doors and window sills to protect them against the rain (if there is a gap at the bottom or sides of your door, cold air and blowing rain will come in).
- Keep a towel or mop near the main entry if you have wood floors. Clean up water when (not if) it comes in. Standing water will ruin your beautiful floor.
- Lower the water in your swimming pool so that it won't overflow during heavy rain (you'll get to do this a few times all winter unless it's covered). The chlorinated water can be very harmful to your grass and other plants.
- Turn off the automated sprinklers! You won't need them again till July at best.
- If you have one, check the sump pump. Lift the float valve; see that the pump starts up. Run some water in the sump with a hose and insure that the discharge is clear. If you have a sump pump, you probably need it so be sure it's working properly and able to do its job getting the water away from the structure.

Enjoy the winter and plan to tackle the "inside" projects. I'm going to re-plumb my house and renovate my bathroom...