

'Shampoo' can clean your roof

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Perhaps you've noticed them while walking your dog around the block — beautiful, well-kept houses with neatly trimmed green lawns and flowerbeds adorning the walkway.

It's all very nice until you look up at the roof, where a big, dark, moss-covered stain sits between the dormer windows on a Cape Cod-style house or a black, streaky pattern covers an otherwise gorgeous colonial house.

Time for a new roof? No — just a good cleaning.

What causes roof stain?

"There are three living things that cause roof stains," said Dave Saunders of E-Z Flow Innovations in Fishkill.

"The black streaks that you see on the roof are actually dead algae," he explained. While the algae is living, it grows on your shingles.

"As the algae dies off, it starts to discolor and turn black," he said. Saunders uses the product Roof Shampoo to remove stains from homes and buildings in Dutchess and

Orange counties. His brother, Tyler Saunders, operates the local company A Cleaner Choice and uses Roof Shampoo on properties in Ulster and Putnam counties.

"Often, the algae originates in standing water as well as in lakes and ponds," added James Bowen of Great State Products LLC. "Wind, birds and other wildlife carry the algae spores to roofs from the water sources and then from roof to roof. The algae normally grows for quite some time before stains are noticed. As the algae grows, it holds more moisture on the roof thus accelerating the growth process."

"The other thing that's very typical on houses is moss, and the third thing is lichen," Dave Saunders said. "Lichen attaches itself and grows on the shingle ... it looks like little scales or flakes. ... There are a lot of factors that go into what causes things to grow on your roof. The actual shingles are made out of a certain concentration of organic material, which provide a nice environment for living things to grow on," Saunders said.

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You might also notice that the houses on one side of your street have nice clean roofs, but those on the other side (the north-facing side) are stained.

"The north-facing side of the roof is normally the side that gets most of, if not all of the growth," Bowen said. "This is due to less direct sun to dry out the surface on the north-facing side."

In addition, dust and pollen and other airborne debris come to rest on roofs, providing a nice environment from which the lichen, etc., can feed.

"The more sun you get, it helps to kill things that are living up there," Saunders said.

Conversely, "the more moist it is, the better the breeding ground it is for things like algae and moss and lichen to grow. So, if you have hanging branches that shade a section of the roof, that tends to be an area where things creep up and start growing," he said.

Ugly or damaging?

"Lichen and moss particularly, are damaging. Over time, they can actually destroy your shingles," Saunders said. "A couple of roofs that we went to clean were so bad that we couldn't do them. There was so much lichen on there. It actually eats away at the shingle."

Bowen added that, "The algae (and moss and lichen) hold moisture to the roof's

surface resulting in the granules, which protect and color the roof, being dislodged over time. Also, when (the growth) stays on the roof over a long period of time, the roof does not dry out completely and this can lead to decay. ... All of this often results in the life of the roof being shortened — leading to early roof replacement."

Stain removal

"We go up (on the roof) and we put down a light application of the Roof Shampoo product," Saunders said, explaining that the product is completely biodegradable and eco-friendly. "It contains no bleach (which can dry out your shingles) or any kind of toxic or harmful chemicals. You can touch it and feel it. It feels like laundry detergent, and it's completely safe for your plants and pets."

But it works on the roof stains.

"It pretty much kills everything on contact. You can actually see the black streaks melt

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right off the roof," he said. "And then we use a low-pressure surface cleaner, which looks like a big floor buffer. That rinses anything we've put on the roof completely off. ... When we're done, you have all the moss, lichen, algae — anything that's growing or living on your roof — it's off 100 percent before we leave."

Both Dave Saunders and Tyler Saunders offer a yearlong guarantee from their respective companies. Following that, they also offer an annual preventative treatment they spray on to keep the growth from coming back.

Bowen's Lancaster, S.C.-based company sells a product homeowners can use to clean their roofs on their own.

Roof-Be-Clean is a product, which after proper dilution, is sprayed onto the roof with an ordinary garden pump sprayer, Bowen said.

"As it goes to work over the next few months, it continues to be effective. When it rains, the stains are gently washed away revealing your roof's true colors once again (normally in about three to nine months)," he said.

Extend roof's life

In addition to keeping your shingles healthy, Bruce Peter of Just Exteriors Plus Inc. said the most important thing for a roof's longevity is proper ventilation.

"A lot of roofers overlook that. They'll take

a roof off and they'll put a roof on, but they won't look inside the attic, and they won't investigate or inspect for ventilation. A roof with poor ventilation usually loses about 25 percent of its life," Peter said.

"If you don't have proper ventilation, a manufacturer can void the warranty," he continued.

It's really critical that a roofing professional who knows what to look for does an inspection of the attic and makes sure that it has adequate ventilation, he said.

Roofing ventilation isn't very expensive to do. "You just need to get what's considered a balanced approach of air coming in and air exiting. So essentially that would be intake and exhaust ventilation. And that's just a key factor. I've seen roofs just delaminate in 10 to 12 years because they didn't have enough ventilation," he said.

Peter added that, regarding roof stains, one thing that a homeowner can do to keep them from returning is to apply a zinc or

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copper oxide strip.

"A metal oxide called zinc or copper oxide is oftentimes built into a roofing shingle so that it resists those algae stains. But for the shingles that don't have it and for a customer who wants to eliminate those stains in the future, he can buy a zinc or copper oxide strip that can be installed along the very top of your roof. As rainwater comes down, it releases the zinc oxide and washes it down the roof and helps to slow down the growth of algae," he said.

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