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The Cutter Closing Such States

Why It's Needed & How to Do It



- Inside GCA Largo
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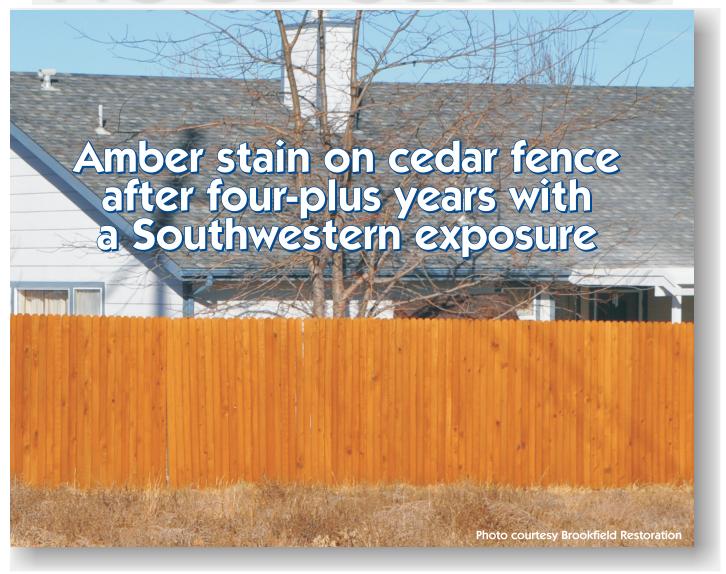
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ARMSTRONG'S WOOD STAINS



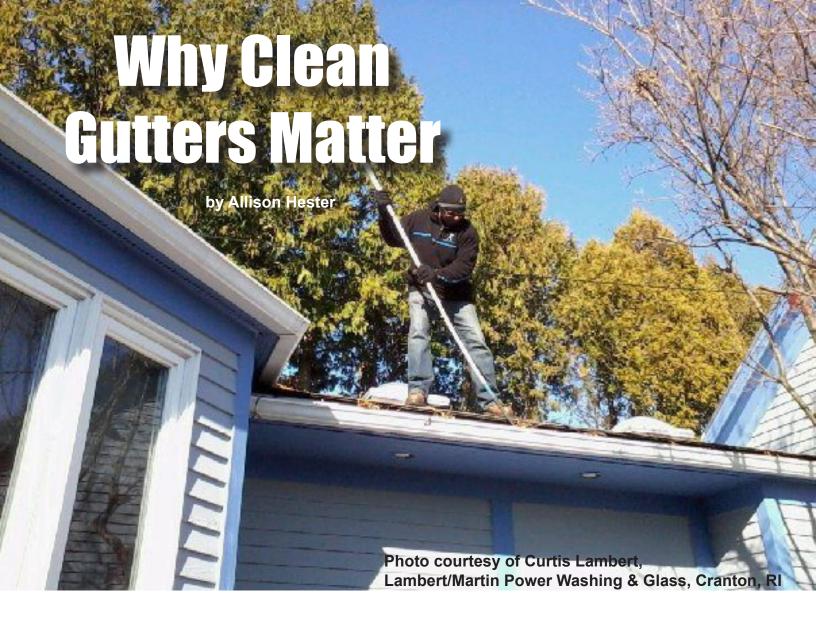
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affordable methods for homeowners to protect their homes from the elements. By channeling water off the roof and directing it to a location away from the home, properly working gutters help protect the home's shingles, wood under the eaves, siding, flooring and landscaping from a whole host of problems and expensive repairs. These include:

- Flooding
- Stained walls, siding, floors, etc.
- Rotting doors and wood elements
- Cracking walls and foundations
- Warping or bowing floors

Not only do these cost money to fix, they also devalue the home itself.

However, if gutters are clogged and not working properly, homeowners may find themselves facing not onlythe same above problems that gutters are designed to prevent, but a whole host of new ones. These include:

- Infestation of mosquitoes and other pests
- Damage caused from gutters ripping down after becoming too clogged and heavy.
 - Frozen gutters (i.e., "ice dams")
- Added mold and mildew from the backed up, decomposed leaves and other organic materials

Keeping gutters clean is not a fun job. For the average homeowner, it's also not an easy one. Worst of all, it's a job that is often made to be more costly than necessary due to neglect.

When and How Often Should Gutters be Cleaned?

While there is no set answer to these



questions, the general rule of thumb is that most gutters should be cleaned twice a year. Fall and Spring are usually the months of choice because that is when they gutters become the most clogged due to falling leaves, pine needles, blooms, seed pods, and so on.

Homes surrounded by a lot of foliage need to have their gutters cleaned more often than those without. Also, houses in areas with four distinct seasons may need to have gutters cleaned more often than those with mild weather year round.

Proper maintenance is less expensive in the long run than catastrophic failure. Maintaining gutters throughout the year not only will help prevent clogged gutter-related damage, it often costs less to have them cleaned should the homeowner hire a professional to do it.

Are Gutter Protection Systems Worth It?

One "solution" to the gutter cleaning problem has been the growing market of gutter guards,

inserts and screens. These are supposedly designed to prevent large items from entering the gutters that create clogs and help the water flow freely.

However, despite what a lot of homeowners believe, none of these products are perfect. Many of these items will keep large items like leaves, bird nests, and rodents out of the gutters, but they can't keep the small items out. Things like pine needles, flower buds, dirt or sand, and roof granules still get past the protection systems and cause problems. Gutters may not have to be cleaned as often – depending on how well the product works – but when they do have to be cleaned, they are generally more expensive because it's harder to access them.

Plus, gutter guards, inserts and screens can be expensive – ranging anywhere from around \$1 to \$30 a linear foot for the average home, depending on the type installed. Some of the professionally installed versions do cover any future maintenance or cleanings, but these are the systems that cost around \$5,000 or more on the average sized home. Considering an average gutter cleaning job costs a few hundered dollars, homeowners need to figure out if it's really worth it.

According to a 2010 Consumer Reports study, many of the "do it yourself" versions of gutter protection systems work as well the high-end versions and cost significantly less – if they are installed properly. But again, they will almost certainly have to be cleaned in time, and those cleanings will cost more.

Why Hire a Professional?

A lot of DIY homeowners decide to tackle gutter cleaning themselves. But is this really smart?

Most gutter cleaning requires working from either the roof or a ladder. Yes, there are some garden hose, vacuum and pressure washer attachments that allow some levels of cleaning to be done from the ground. However, when working from the ground, there's no way to see how dirty the gutter really is or how clean it's getting. Plus some of those systems are hard to control if you're not used to it. It's easy to cause accidental damage.

Right: Ladder Accidents by Gender & Age. This 2012 graphic is based on figures in the U.K, but the numbers are still very telling for North American homeowners. Note that the majority of injuries happened to men ages 15 to 64 who were in the middle of a home maintenance project (like cleaning their gutters.)

Ladder work is dangerous. (See the graphic to the right.) And the more you have to move the ladder, the more dangerous it becomes. The higher you up you have to go on the ladder, the more dangerous it is as well.

When a homeowner cleans out a gutter, they're not just climbing a ladder. They're climbing a ladder and carrying tools – like a scoop or a vacuum or a blower. They are climbing a ladder and trying to remove a gutter protection system. They are on top of a ladder reaching out to grab that leaf that's a little too far away, and with each reach they are increasing their risk of injury.

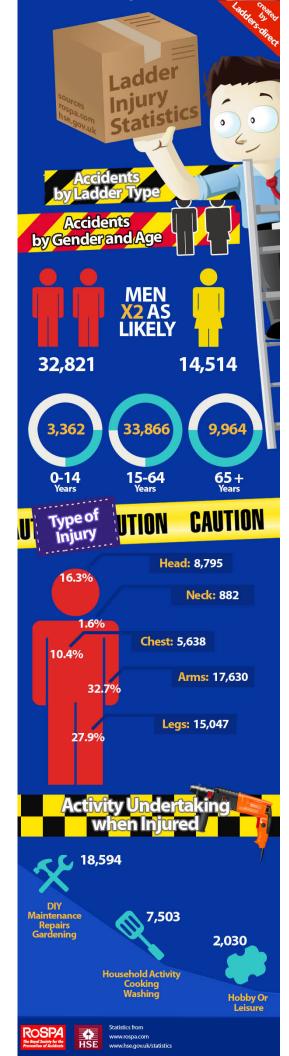
Additionally, professionals can also check a homeowners' gutter system to look for, and correct, problems. They know how to ensure that downspouts are not clogged to keep the gutter system flowing properly.

The Smartest Solution

Homeowners need to look at their gutter systems as an investment in their home's value and their family's well-being. Cleaned gutters not only help prevent problems with the home, they help promote a healthier home environment. And along those same lines, hiring a professional rather than doing it themselves is an investment in their family's well being. One slip from a ladder or roof could result in expensive medical bills, weeks off of work – or much worse.

Again, gutter protection systems are an option, but they are not an all-out solution. Gutters will still need to be cleaned periodically to ensure they are working properly. Homeowners need to evaluate whether the expense of the system will pay out in the long run, and even DIY installation systems should ideally be put in by a professional. Again, it keeps the homeowner safely on the ground, and helps ensure the system is installed and working correctly.

Most importantly, homeowners should not wait until after a problem arises to have their gutters cleaned. It's better to get on a maintenance program with a reputable, professional cleaning contractor and determine how many cleanings that particular homeowner really needs. Regularly scheduled maintenance gutter cleanings can save significant mooney in the long run.





As this month's cover article already explained, gutter cleaning is a necessity for homeowners who want to protect their property. Again, the best option for homeowners is to hire a professional. (See "Why Clean Gutters Matter" on page 5 for more on this.)

But, what are the best gutter cleaning options for professional contractors?

To help us figure this out, I developed a 15-question survey for industry members, then followed up with a few interviews. Within a couple of days of the survey being announced, I received more than enough responses to help me gain a better understanding of the gutter cleaning market. (Thanks to all of you who participated.) The following is based off of these findings, along with some additional research.

When to Clean

Fall tends to be the primary season for gutter cleaning, with Spring coming in a close

second, which corresponds with the times that the majority of leaves, seedlings, buds, pine needles, and acorns fall, clogging the gutters. These are the primary types of items – although generally decaying and sloppy – that need to be removed. However, contractors have seen it all – trees, ferns, cacti, golf balls, bird nests, dead birds, dead rats, live snakes, fire ants, bee hives, and the list goes on and on.

Roof granules are another problem, and one that can be a pain to remove. While mud and decay can be scooped out and disposed of, granules have to be gathered together then scooped (depending on the amount) or flushed out with water for smaller quantities.

As mentioned in the cover article, getting a maintenance contract is the best option for professional cleaners and homeowners alike. This helps keep the gutters working properly, and makes the gutter cleaning job easier. Providing a discount for regular maintenance

may be something worth considering.

For example, Mike Dingler of Firehouse Power Washing in Senoia, Georgia, estimated a gutter cleaning job for \$125, but the customer asked Dingler if would discount it to \$100 if he agreed to have his gutters cleaned regularly. Dingler agreed and has been cleaning the customer's gutters almost monthly for the past two years. "The only months he does not want them done is in June and July, which is when I wash his house and driveway for more money," he added. "It just goes to show you that occasionally a 'one time' gutter cleaning can turn into a \$1500 a year account."

How to Price

While around 75 percent of those who responded will offer gutter cleaning services alone, one-fourth only provide gutter cleaning in conjunction with other cleaning services. Part of this is because gutter cleaning can a make a mess of the house and windows. Another aspect is that some people just don't like doing it. A few also mentioned they will throw in gutter cleaning for free to residential customers who buy larger cleaning packages from them.

"Gutters that are clogged and packed with mud and mold are very hard to clean while keeping the rest of the property spotless," explained Tyr Denlinger of Pacific Window Cleaning Company in Wailuku, Hawaii. "If I can't negotiate a fair price on other types of cleaning with this type of customer, I'm somettimes better off just passing on the job."

While most contractors agree that you never know what you're going to find in a gutter, not everyone figures in how dirty the gutters are when giving a price. In fact, almost half of those who answered do not include this in their estimates.

Pricing is figured several ways. Most start with the linear footage, then also factor in how many stories high the gutters are. Some stop there. Others will look at the pitch of the roof to see if roof access is possible. Still others try to figure out how dirty the gutters are, either through a customer questionnaire, by examining the property – and how much foliage

surrounds the house – or by actually visually inspecting the gutters. (This last option is the exception, not the norm.)

"I have a webpage dedicated to gutter cleaning, so customers can familiarize themselves with us and the process before they call. I ask several questions about the height of the house, the size of the house, the type and pitch of the roof, maintenance history of gutters, travel distance to the site, and so on. I occasionally ask for photos emailed or texted to me, then I quote over the phone nine out of 10 times," explained Bill Feil of GutterX in St. Charles, Missouri. "Some projects require a visit to examine the site before a firm price is possible."

"It's also important to look at the condition of the gutters and downspouts," stressed Bill Schoenherr of BF Home Services in Rochester, New York. "Are they pitched properly? Are the hangers all secure?"

This is a really important point, and one that Frank Franzoi of Hydroclean in Brighton, Michigan, learned the hard way. "While cleaning the front of a home, I was midway through when the whole section collapsed and fell to the ground. The homeowner was aware of this and expected it, but I still fixed the situation even while the homeowner was raving mad and threatening to sue. They have not called nor have I heard from an attorney. I guess being nice paid off in the long run."

Another reason to inspect the gutters is because you never know you're going to have to remove.

Matt Schaltenbrand of Advanced Pressure and Gutter Cleaning, Inc., in Marietta, Georgia,



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obtained a contract through a third party that included cleaning the gutters of 200 buildings. "When we got there, it was all trash on the roof – not organic debris. We had to bag and haul thousands of pounds to dumpsters over about four days. To top it off, we never got paid as the middle subcontractor took the money and ran."

Almost everyone – around 90 percent – agreed that they charged more for cleanings when gutter protection systems were in place.

"I do one each year that has covers that don't work well," said Dan Wagner of Dan Wagner Window Cleaning in Honesville, Penn. "Each section has several screws holding them in place. They are very hard to remove and get worse each year."

"One of our first jobs was a single level home that had mesh gutter guards that were not working to well," said Curtis Lambert II of Lambert/Martin Window Cleaning in Cranston, RI. "The gutter beds were full of bird poop, mud, twigs, leaves... you name it. We got through it, but learned just how to let our customers know what to do to fix their problem." In his case, Lambert upsells and installs the Rain Flow Gutter Protection System.

Ironically, one of the biggest complaints by contractors about gutter cleaning is that they have undercharged for jobs. That's why some prefer to charge an hourly rate. That way if there are surprises, at least they are getting paid to deal with them.

The Cleaning Process

(Note: this article focus on the interior of cleaning gutters only. For external cleaning, and the removal of "tiger stripes," see the article on page 14.)

One of the primary things contractors wanted to know was if there was a good way to clean the interior of gutters from the ground. Unfortunately, if there is, I didn't learn about it, especially on multistory homes. A few people have come up with ways to clean first-story gutters from the ground by using vacuums or pressure washers and special gutter attachments.

Two specific products were mentioned. First, a couple of contractors liked the GutterBall — a special gutter cleaning nozzle that attaches to a pressure washer. The only complaint was that the Gutter Ball created a mess on the ground. (We posted an article about the Gutter Ball back in January 2012 that you can **read on our website**.)

Another item that was mentioned was the Gutter Blaster, which is a special bent wand

and nozzle that attaches to a garden hose. There are other similar products on the market.

However, in most cases, cleaning from the ground simply doesn't do as good a job as cleaning from a ladder or rooftop. In fact, in many cases, scooping the gutters out by hand is simply the professional method of choice.

When not working from the ground, most contractors do the majority of their gutter cleaning work from a ladder. Because ladder safety is such a huge issue, we are going to produce a separate resource – due out later this month – dedicated to this topic. However, it is imperative to say that a ladder standoff stabilizer attachment needs to put in place any time ladder work is being done. Ladder-Max was the brand mentioned by a few.

"Using the Ladder-Max standoff attached to the top of the ladder means that you are letting the feet of the standoff rest on the shingles and stabilizing the ladder. It is a lot safer than just leaning an extension ladder against a gutter, in which case the ladder could travel and one could fall to the ground," explained Chris Thompson of Attention to Detail Window Cleaning Bottineau, ND. "The other benefit is that it prevents you from scratching the face of the gutter, which happens when leaning the ladder against the gutter." Thompson also pointed out the need for using leg levelers at the base of any extension ladder.

Another ladder tip is one that Glenn Igler of Enviroclean Pressure Washing in Atlanta learned the hard way. "If you leave the ladder to work on the roof, make sure the ladder is secure. On several occasions when I first started, I was on the roof with the wand and hose, and the hose caught the ladder and knocked it down. Fortunately, there were some nice folks nearby that put it back up for me so I could get down."

While most work is done from ladders, roof work is generally preferred to ladder work when possible. "I like to stay safe, and as ironic as it sounds, the roof is a lot safer than a ladder, especially when using tools like a pressure washer to clean gutters," explained Dingler. "Back pressure is created when you pull the trigger, and it can slide the ladder down the gutter and result in a fall."

Walking the roof allows for the use of additional tools, like a leaf blower. "You'll want





something that is gas powered and commercial grade. I have an ECHO, but STIHL makes a good product as well," said Thompson. "You want a backpack blower because it is safer and they have more power than a handheld. A gas powered is also safer than an electric, since there is not a chance of tripping over the electrical cord while walking on the roof."

Beyond these items, there are no real magical tools of choice either. Buckets. Brushes. Extension poles. Scoops. Those were the most common tools mentioned. But a lot of cleaning is done by hand.

"Most gutters that my son Zach cleans contain wet contents, so the cleaning is done by hand and the contents are placed in a bucket," explained Tim Fields, owner of Complete Power Wash in Clear Spring, Maryland. "On walkable ranchers, he scoots along the roof's lower edge on his hands and knees, hand scooping the contents into buckets."

A couple of bucket related tips. First, several recommended using some sort of hook so the bucket can hang safely and free up the technician's hands. Thompson also suggested attaching a rope to the bucket using a dog leash clip so you can lower the bucket down safely to the ground from the roof or ladder.

Marc Cournover of Comes a Time Powerwashing in Canton, Ohio, averages 10 houses a day doing everything by hand. "We call it a 'white glove service' and we actually wear white Atlas gloves." All collected debris goes into five-gallon buckets and is dumped either in the woods or in the back of the truck.

Extension poles with scoops or tools such

Bucket of gutter debris. Courtesy of Tim Fields, Complete Power Wash, Hagerstown, Maryland, www.CPSoftwash.com

as the "Gutter Grabber" were particularly popular choices when doing ladder work. "On two story homes, Zach will set the ladder at the downspout end to make sure that it is clear and then move the ladder 10 or 12 feet down the gutter," said Fields. "After resetting the ladder, he uses an eight-to-16-foot extended pole with a WCR (Window Cleaning Resource) gutter tool on the end, pulling from about 12 feet in each direction, placing the contents in the bucket." This allows them to clean as much as 24 feet of gutter with only one ladder set up. When Zach reaches the far end of the gutter, he uses a pressure hose with a ball valve attached and flushes the gutter and downspout with water.

Wes Buckner of Mid-Ohio Window Cleaning in Galion, Ohio, uses gutter scoops, but also has created some homemade tools to assist in gutter cleaning. "I have a tool to help drag or push debris from under one section of gutter cover so I only have to remove every other section to clean the gutter." However, there is no "golden ticket" when it comes to gutter cleaning tools. "I haven't really found that one tool works better than the other because you have so many different circumstances that come into play. You have to diversify. What works for one job may not work for the next."

Cleaning the Downspout

Perhaps the most important aspect is ensuring the downspout is working properly. Some prefer to get the downspout flowing first thing, while others tackle that feat last.

Generally, contractors will use a water hose to determine how well the downspout is flowing, then remove any clogs. Contractors usually begin by attempting to push any debris inside the downspout downward – using a hose and nozzle, a pressure washer, a sewer snake, or a leaf blower – until it all comes out the other end.

"I unclog downspouts two different ways – either with a long snake-like metal device that goes down the downspout to push leaves and debris out," said Jeff Stifnell of Jeff's Window Cleaning in Green Lane, Penn. "Or, if the clog is really bad, I disassemble the downspout,

remove the clog and reassemble everything.

"That's why it's important to always carry a cordless drill with a ¼-inch hex driver," said Billy Gallagher of Wm Gallagher Gutter & Window Cleaning Inc., in Fort Washington, Penn. Next, "disassemble the elbows because this is usually where the clogs are."

Another tip from Keith Ayotte, Top Notch Soft Wash LLC, West Brookfield, Massachusetts: "Always have tools with you! You never know when something might happen that you weren't planning on, like a down spout falling or gutter caps coming off."

Gutter Cleaning Wisdom

Gutter cleaning gets easier with time and experience, but you always have to expect the unexpected. "I've had tough ones have been frozen. Downspouts packed solid that you had to take apart. Underground drains that are plugged. Some installed so tight to the roof that you can't get your hands into them. Some with bee and wasp nests, and probably about

20 other things," said Rick Swope of Grime Busters LLC in Cement City, Michigan. "But it all goes with the job."

"We all can share an experience of gallons of smelly gutter water gushing on top of us after taking a drain assembly apart," added Ron Perks of Perks Window Cleaning Ltd. in West Vancouver, BC. "The busy season is coming up. It's best not to think of it."

Gutter cleaning, unfortunately, is one of those markets that is filled with lowballers. As with other cleaning services, the key is to differentiate your company through professionalism – maintaining liability and workers comp insurance, ensuring downspouts are working properly, not leaving a mess on the yard, and showing up when scheduled.

And again, experience is going to become more valuable than any gutter cleaning gadget on the market. "Just like pressure washing, with proper training, a good crew can handle many jobs easily in one day," added Schaltenbrand. "Some specific tools can be used, but it's more about the skill of the tech."

Joseph D. Walters

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