



“Green” Roof Cleaning

by Michelle Finley and John Browne

As we continue to educate ourselves on “green” options in our lives, it is important to know there are cost-effective options for your roof, too. Not only is going green on your roof cost-effective, but it helps to eliminate the wear and tear that can lead to premature replacement and it conserves water in comparison to cleaning. Experienced property managers familiar with the effects of repeated roof cleaning know that using high pressure or harsh chemicals can greatly accelerate the aging of a roof, and many just accept it as “the cost” of keeping roofs clean—but there are effective ways to avoid this.

Roof Maintenance

Proper maintenance is obviously important to a community’s image, protection of property values, and homeowner enjoyment of the community.

It is also essential for controlling both short- and long-term costs. Property managers and board members taking on the responsibility of evaluating and planning the long-term direction and finances of a community should always be aware of what the long-term effects of maintenance, or lack of it, will be on the long-term costs to the community.

Roofs are a prime example. If properly installed and maintained, a quality roof should last 25–30 years and, in some cases, up to 50 years. Unfortunately, many roofs in South Florida are in need of major repair or replacement after ONLY 15 years—or roughly 50 percent of their expected useful life!

Why? This usually happens when there is no plan for regularly scheduled inspection and maintenance to find and fix small problems before they become much bigger problems. Another reason is repeated cleaning using high pressure and/or harsh chemicals. While effective if done correctly, repeated use of

these methods will damage the roof surface and, more importantly, the underlying weatherproofing. It is important, if you must clean your roof, to follow the tile and shingle manufacturers recommended cleaning procedures. Not only will this keep your warranty intact, but it will obviously help give your roof its longest life.

While the reasons for cleaning are important—aesthetics, property values, energy efficiency, and increased longevity of the roof—not much is gained if the roofs are being damaged during the cleaning process. But whatever the reason is for cleaning, if it is going to be done, it is in your best interest to know what choices are available and how they will affect the roof.

What Causes the Roofs to Be Dirty?

Scientists at 3M have identified the black streaking typically found on roofs as *Gloeocapsa Magma* or roof algae. These algae spores are carried by the wind, which is why so many houses in the same neighborhood can end up with this problem. During the last 20 years, this particular algae strain has become hardier and so has been able to migrate to less humid environments than it has in the past. And in areas where it traditionally has been found, the staining is showing up earlier, is more severe, and settles on a greater number of roofs. This is a “growing” problem throughout the United States.

The Roof Is Dirty—How Can It Be Cleaned?

Typical roof cleaning methods involve either pressure cleaning or chemical cleaning with chlorine bleach or sodium hydroxide. Each method has its advantages and disadvantages.

A chlorine and water solution can be used followed by a thorough rinse. Of course, since chlorine can be toxic to people and plants, proper care should be taken to protect the surrounding property from overspray and runoff. Heavy solutions of chlorine, generally anything over 15 percent, are NOT recommended and unnecessary. The reasoning behind using high levels of chlorine or bleach cleaning include a much faster process and include minimal rinsing as compared to other methods. However, you should understand plant damage is likely and this type of cleaning will generally not last

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longer than one year whereas nothing was truly cleaned away. This can translate into less wear and tear on the roof—particularly asphalt shingle roofs. Keep in mind, however, high solutions of chlorine can cause rusting and damage to metal valley underlining and flashings.

Sodium hydroxide based cleaners are generally advertised as safer for the landscaping, but sodium hydroxide is caustic, very toxic, and care should always be used to protect surrounding property and employees. Sodium hydroxide is also a very effective degreaser, so high levels in a cleaning product can cause irreversible damage to an asphalt shingle roof. These products generally require much more rinsing than the chlorine method, and the rinsing process can also be potentially damaging to the roof if not done correctly. A quality sodium hydroxide based product should not require any more than 100 psi to effectively rinse a shingle roof, and even then, some minor granule loss should be expected. For shingles, it is important to make sure you are getting a “no pressure,” pressure clean with commercial grade equipment.

Pressure cleaning is an option that should only be used on concrete, clay, or metal roofs. The goal is to kill the fungus and loosen the dirt to then be cleaned off with the appropriate amount of pressure. The pressure guidelines are set by the tile and shingle manufacturers and experienced cleaners should be able to explain these guidelines. Pressure cleaning as per the tile manufacturers’ guidelines eliminates most of the landscaping and chemical concerns, but it is time-consuming and should only be done by a professional

since tile breakage is a possibility. This type of cleaning will generally last twice as long as chemical cleaning.


These Methods Are Not a Long-Term Solution

While these methods can be safe and effective when done properly, repeated cleaning can lead to premature aging of the roof. The natural erosion that occurs over time from the basic forces of heat, cold, wind, and rain alone are enough to bring most roofs to the point where annual inspections and minor repairs are a necessity to prevent significant repair costs. But when the roof is repeatedly subjected to high pressures or harsh chemicals, the aging of the roof is greatly accelerated.

What Is the Best Alternative? Go Green!

The most effective long-term strategies will minimize the use of high pressures and harsh chemicals by stressing preventative maintenance from the start and use of only tile/shingle manufacturer approved methods of cleaning and treatment. These strategies should include periodic roof inspections/maintenance, keeping the roof free of debris, and preventing algae growth before it begins. A proper program of preventative maintenance and algacide protection will eliminate the need for future cleaning and the potential for damage that comes along with it—giving the homeowner and/or community an aesthetically pleasing roof for the full life of the roof.

Various companies throughout the U.S. manufacture products that can inhibit the



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growth of roof algae for months and sometimes years with each application. The most appropriate roof algae prevention products are those that are guaranteed, specifically designed for roofs, and approved by the roofing materials manufacturers and the EPA and are safe for people, pets, and plants (non-toxic/environmentally friendly). An important note: Be sure to ask what the fungicide/algaecide is and don't let a company fool you by selling you a "treatment plan" with just a chlorine base which is considered a fungicide/algaecide. It can be very cost-effective to "go green" and minimize use of chlorine products and, at the same time, eliminate the need for future cleaning.

Most algaecides will last a minimum of six to twelve months and some last as long as two to three years before reapplication of the product is necessary. Obviously, the longer the time frame, the better your chances are of minimizing any unnecessary damage to the roof. Prevention programs should be done in conjunction with neighbors whenever possible.

One important note about algaecides: Algaecide products are regulated at both the state and federal level. Any algaecide product used on a roof requires EPA registration as a pesticide or biocide and approval for use on a roof.

Information provided by Michelle Finley, Hoover Pressure Cleaning & John Browne, owner of Roof-A-Cide in Palm City, FL. For more information visit, www.hooverpressure.com and www.roof-a-cide.com. ■

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