

GUTTER CLEANING TIPS

Protect yourself and others from death and injury by learning the proper way to clean roof gutters. The best season to clean gutters is autumn, in preparation for wintertime precipitation. When leaves and debris block the gutter and downspout system, rainwater damage occurs, which results in costly repairs for the homeowner.

Follow these tips to safely and successfully clean gutters:

LADDER SAFETY

Always let someone know you will be using a ladder to work on your roof or gutters. Use a safe and sturdy ladder, preferably with a small shelf strong enough to hold a five-gallon bucket to collect gutter debris. Make sure to secure the bucket with a lanyard. I recommend a four-legged step ladder for a single story home, and an extension ladder for a two-story home. An orchard ladder is not recommended because there are only three legs for support and they can become unbalanced.

A wooden ladder is also not recommended because they are often wobbly and difficult to safely balance. Fiberglass ladders seem to be the sturdiest, but are also the heaviest. If you are cleaning gutters for hours upon hours, muscle fatigue can set in from moving the heavy ladder numerous times. If this is the case, you should try using an aluminum ladder, which is the second-choice option for strength and support.

Inspect the ladder for defects, dents or loose parts before climbing. If your ladder is fastened together with screws and bolts, make sure all parts are tightened. When opening up a step ladder, make sure the extension-hinge arms are fully extended and locked in place.

GARDEN HOSE

Use a garden hose with a pistol-grip trigger spray nozzle. This type of spray nozzle allows you to adjust the water pressure with the use of just one hand. This style of spray nozzle comes with a handy pistol-grip trigger, allowing it to be easily hung over the front edge of the gutter while moving the ladder, or while using a gutter scoop. This type of spray nozzle can be purchased at any hardware store.

GUTTER SCOOP

Scooping out the leafy debris seems to be the best overall method for cleaning out the gutter. An excellent tool for this job is the bright orange plastic "Gutter Getter" scoop, which can be purchased at most hardware stores. This tool is unique because the front scooping edge is very thin and it forms itself to the bottom of the gutter trough, making it easy to scoop out even

the toughest of debris in any size gutter system.

Stay away from using a metal scooping tool because the bottom of the gutter and seams can be damaged and scratched. Scraping the bottom of a steel gutter can introduce areas to rust, and if the bottom of the gutter is already rusting, the rusting process could speed up.

WEAR GLOVES

Gloves can help protect hands against dirty, rotting leaf debris that often contains bird, pigeon and squirrel droppings that are ridden with bacteria. Gloves can also prevent painful cuts from the torn metal shards of an old, ragged gutter. Cotton gloves can soak up dirty water that exposes skin to bacteria. Leather gloves are not as maneuverable and tend to shrivel up when they dry after cleaning. Rubber gloves can get poked or torn by metal shards in the gutter. Thick, suede glove material is recommended because it is superior to cotton, thin leather or rubber gloves.

PROTECTIVE EYE WEAR

Eye protection is a must because one never knows what might fly out of the downspout when cleaning gutters. People have experienced rats, birds, frogs, wasps and bees leaving at high speeds once they start removing a clog, and the last thing they want to have happen is an eye injury.

RAKE OFF ROOF

Rake all debris off the roof first. Otherwise, the next rain will wash all the debris down into the clean gutter, clogging it up again. Also, debris left on the roof can lead to water damming up in valleys or around the chimney, which can cause erosion and roof leaks over time.

RUBBER SHOES

If walking on the roof is necessary to perform gutter cleaning, it is good to use rubber soled shoes. Rubber soles tend to adhere best and prevent slipping and falls. Roof tops tend to be moist in the morning, so it is best to walk on the roof after the sun is well up in the sky and has dried up all the moisture. Late mornings or early afternoons are the best times to walk on a roof.

DOWNSPOUTS UNCLOGGED

Make sure the downspouts (leader pipe) are clear. After all the gutters are cleaned out, run the water hose down the downspout at full pressure. If the water backs up out of the top, a clog is present. Normally, it can be unclogged by tapping on the side of the downspout. But if that doesn't work, the downspout and back need to be removed, and it should be flushed from the bottom. If a clog is present, and the downspout is connected to an underground drain, it is best to disconnect the bottom of the downspout from the underground drain. Otherwise, the clog may move to the underground drain.

CLEAN GUTTERS TWO TIMES A YEAR

Make sure gutters are cleaned at least twice a year, once in the fall and again in the spring. One main reason for cleaning out gutters is to eliminate the possibility of water damage from rainwater runoff due to a clogged gutter. Another reason is to reduce the possibility of rust corrosion. Even though it may not rain during the summer, if there is debris in the steel gutters, the rusting process can speed up. It's difficult for rust to speed up with clean gutters. The faster the rusting process, the sooner new gutters will be needed.

POWER LINE HAZARD

When cleaning gutters around a power line cable that drops from the power pole to the roof of a home, conduct a visual inspection of the electrical cable where it connects to the roof. This is to ensure that the protective wire insulation hasn't rubbed off through years of wear-and-tear by weather and nearby trees. If the cable appears to have damage, do not attempt to repair it. Call a licensed professional electrical contractor to fix it.

If it's raining and there is an electrical wire problem, do not attempt to clean out the gutters until the wires are fixed. Water is a dangerous conductor of electricity. Whether it's raining or not, it would be a good idea to have the electrical wiring repaired before cleaning out your gutters. ■