

The Seattle Times

Saturday, November 6, 2010 - Page updated at 12:01 AM

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Showing the rain who's boss

By Tom Watson

Special to The Seattle Times

We're so blasé about the rain here in the Northwest that we often forget the damage it can do.

After all, isn't an occasional wet basement or other water damage in our home just a fact of life? It's the Seattle homeowner's curse. But "just a little water" can have significant economic and environmental consequences.

Q: I see how a wet basement might reduce the monetary value of a house, but what are the environmental costs?

A: Water damage can lead to structural problems, wasting resources by shortening the life of a home. Moisture in your house may also spur the growth of mold, compromising indoor air quality and potentially causing allergic reactions.

The residual waste and resource consumption from water damage also adds up. Soaked carpets and musty-smelling books and clothes usually end up getting thrown away.

Q: Is the water-damage potential worse here than in other places?

A: Yes. November through January, Seattle receives an average of 17 inches of precipitation. Portland actually has us beat with 19.4 inches. Those totals greatly exceed the amounts for most other cities during those months, such as Chicago's 8.1 inches of precipitation. Some areas get more rain in other seasons than we do, but winter rains take more of a toll on a house because surfaces don't dry as quickly.

Even though Portland gets more winter rainfall, Seattle may still win the water-damage derby because so many of our homes are built on hillsides or in valleys. Moving water needs a place to go, and too often that place is somebody's basement.

Q: So what are the best ways to keep water out of my home?

A: Most of the standard tips have merit, so it's really a matter of finding the time and motivation to follow them. Fix the gutters and make sure they're not clogged, and slope the grade of soil away from the house.

Q: What about a rain garden?

A: Virtually unknown just a few years ago, rain gardens have really caught on here. This method works well to divert rainwater away from your home, especially if you are not able to have the soil sloped away from the foundation.

A rain garden is a scooped-out area in your yard planted with attractive native plants, including grasses and flowering perennials. Piping, usually underground, brings runoff rainwater from the roof or elsewhere into the rain garden, which needs to be at least 10 feet from your home.

Washington State University's Pierce County Extension offers a comprehensive online guide to installing a rain garden (go to www.search.wsu.edu and search for "rain garden handbook"). The weather probably precludes building one this year, but you could plan it this winter and put it in next year.

Q: What about tips for inside the home?

A: As a general rule, installing carpet in a Seattle basement is asking for trouble. Even a basement that has remained dry for years can flood suddenly, so keep everything at least four inches off the floor.

If you know your basement floods occasionally, no matter what steps you've taken outside, consider a sump pump. You may want a battery backup for it, since a power outage often accompanies heavy rains.

Always keep watch for mold, which can furtively permeate your walls and escalate into a serious problem. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency provides useful resources for controlling moisture and mold: www.epa.gov/mold.

Q: How do I avoid that awful musty smell on stuff I store in the basement?

A: Keeping your basement dry and well-ventilated should alleviate that problem. But if your basement always seems a little damp, be sure to seal all your clothes and books in airtight, waterproof plastic containers.

In the words of a recent hit country song, "Rain is a good thing." We just need to keep it in its place.

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