



Why Clean Gutters Matter

by Allison Hester

Photo courtesy of Curtis Lambert,
Lambert/Martin Power Washing & Glass, Cranston, RI

Gutters are one of the most valuable and 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 the 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



Photo courtesy of It's Gutter be Clean,
www.ItsGutterBeClean.co.UK

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 hundred 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 money in the long run.

