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Why Gutters Are Important

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I have to quote from John Leeke's article on Half Round Metal Gutters from the July '92 issue of Old House Journal to properly convey the importance of gutters: "Bring up gutters and many renovators will say they're more trouble than they're worth. They pull them off the house, haul them away to the dump and say good riddance. It's true gutters are not inexpensive to buy, and afterwards they are a chore to keep clean and in good repair. Then why go to the trouble to install and maintain a gutter system? The answer is to prevent serious water damage. At one house I worked on, the gutters were removed because they were three stories up and always choked with leaves. Only four years later the foundation had cracked and buckled more than four inches into the cellar due to moisture buildup and frost heaving in the soil outside. This major structural damage was a direct result of the gutter removal, and the cost of the foundation repairs was far greater than several decades of routine gutter maintenance."

When to Inspect Gutters

Believe it or not, the best time to look and see how your gutter system is working is during a rainstorm. Look for a steady flow of water out of the downspouts. If nothing is draining, you've got blockages somewhere, or the gutter is not properly pitched toward the downspout.

Identifying Locations of Gutter Blockage

Look for straining and mildew on the outer surface of the gutter. This could indicate that water is not draining from this area of the gutter, or water from the roof is overshooting the gutter. Buildup of leaves, dirt and debris will almost certainly be helping to clog gutters if you have not cleaned them thoroughly since before the winter. Also, check your downspouts. If you knock on them and they do not have a hollow sound, they are probably filled with debris such as decaying leaves and dirt.

How to Clean Gutters

Keeping gutters clean and flowing properly is of absolute paramount importance to proper historic house maintenance. You have to do it at least every season and more often if trees and shrubs surround your house. It is worth hiring an insured roofing contractor to come in every three months to get up on a ladder and clean all gutters and downspouts. After the contractor has completed cleaning, test the system with a garden hose to make sure that flowage from the roof system is consistent. Have the roofer take a picture of any suspect areas of the gutter system that may require repairs – usually re-fastening or re-setting the gutter so it pitches properly towards the downspout. At the downspout ends, make sure water doesn't just jump directly onto the foundation. If your downspouts do not drop into a storm drain, sub-surface drainage system or swale that carries water away from the foundation, you may want to think about building or purchasing runouts that carry water away from the foundation at grade. In the previously cited article, John Leeke mentions that fabricating hinged ground leaders is a great way to take care of this problem, while not creating a nuisance when it comes to mow the lawn.

Rules for Proper Gutter Maintenance

- Inspect your system for proper drainage often, at least every season.
- Clean all gutters and downspouts four times per year, at a minimum.
- Test the system with a garden hose to understand how it works and where the problems may arise.
- Rainwater should be channeled away from the foundation.
- Gutters are sacrificial architectural elements – which WILL need to be replaced at some point!

Courtesy of A-1 Aluminum Inc.

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