

Got mold?

IN VACANT HOMES, PROBLEM CAN BE EXTENSIVE



Mold remediation contractor Jason Mercer stands with some of the tools he used on a job Wednesday. (T&G Staff/RICK CINCLAIR)

By Thomas Caywood TELEGRAM & GAZETTE STAFF



Mold creeps up the wall of this basement. (PHOTO COURTESY OF JASON MERCER)

[Enlarge photo](#)



A house at 857 Grove St. Terrace in Worcester is contaminated with mold. (T&G Staff/RICK CINCLAIR)

Mold and moisture guide

- When water leaks or spills occur indoors - ACT QUICKLY. If wet or damp materials or areas are dried 24-48 hours after a leak or spill happens, in most cases mold will not grow.
- Clean and repair roof gutters regularly.
- Make sure the ground slopes away from the building foundation, so that water does not enter or collect around the foundation.
- Keep air conditioning drip pans clean and the drain lines unobstructed and flowing properly.
- Keep indoor humidity low. If possible, keep indoor humidity below 60 percent (ideally between 30 and 50 percent) relative humidity. Relative humidity can be measured with a moisture or humidity meter, a small, inexpensive (\$10-\$50) instrument available at many hardware stores.
- If you see condensation or moisture collecting on windows, walls or pipes ACT QUICKLY to dry the wet surface and reduce the moisture/water source. Condensation can be a sign of high humidity.

Source: www.epa.gov

The housing crisis that has resulted in thousands of foreclosures throughout the region in recent years has been devastating for people who lost their homes or whose neighborhoods have been blighted by increasingly shabby vacant properties.

But the persistent real estate market downturn has been a major lifestyle boon to at least one constituency: fungi.

With some foreclosed homes languishing empty for two years or more, many owned by far-flung international banks unable or unwilling to see to their upkeep, potentially hazardous mold is quietly spreading and flourishing in the damp darkness behind boarded-up windows and locked front doors.

“I walked into a house just last week that had chronic water penetration from the roof, and there was a room that had been closed up. It had mold growing all over the boxes and walls and ceiling. I

walked in there and immediately started coughing. I had to get out," said Russell Haims, a Worcester developer who buys rundown properties for renovation and resale.

Mold remediation contractor Jason Mercer, project manager for Advanced Cleaning & Restoration of Worcester, said he has seen foreclosed homes with mold growing from the floors all the way up the walls and onto the ceilings.

"It smells really bad. You can tell when you open the door that you can't even go in there to do the estimate without a respirator," Mr. Mercer said.

He has donned his respirator, surgical gloves and white Tyvek jumpsuit to rip out moldy wallboards and carpet from three-deckers in the city and from sprawling colonials in the suburbs.

Mr. Haims said he recently looked at a large, upscale home on the market in Paxton that had been sealed up since a foreclosure. There was a water leak during the time the house sat vacant, and he found the interior walls and ceilings throughout the roughly 5,000-square-foot house almost completely covered with splotchy, black mold. The house, which he didn't buy, will have to be gutted down to bare studs to make it habitable again, he said.

David Roy, the owner of Shrewsbury-based mold testing and cleanup firm MicroZyme Technologies, estimated that at least half of all foreclosed homes that have sat vacant for any length of time have mold problems.

"I've seen \$900,000 homes where the forced hot water heater on the second floor burst and there's water all through the house," Mr. Roy said. "And a lot of these houses are sitting for 18 months to two years. With the houses being closed up, no ventilation, the mold problems are quite extensive."

Years into the housing market meltdown, the inventory of foreclosed homes continues to grow across the region. During the first eight months of this year, 1,768 residential foreclosure auctions have been held in Worcester County, according to figures from the Boston real estate tracking firm The Warren Group. During the same period last year, 2,740 foreclosure auctions were held in the county.

"When the banks first take over these homes, it amazes me how disinterested they are in terms of getting a plumber in there or anything," Mr. Roy said. "I looked at one house in Winchendon that was so far gone, I wondered how they were going to salvage it."

Mr. Mercer said that when real estate firms working for banks hire him to do a mold remediation estimate, often they don't intend to actually have him do the work, but rather want to know how much they should knock off the price of the house because of mold.

Homes not properly winterized and secured after a foreclosure are susceptible to water damage, followed by mold growth, when water pipes burst amid frigid winter temperatures or are simply ripped out by copper thieves for sale to scrap metal dealers.

Sometimes simple condensation inside an unheated house due to temperature fluctuations is enough to start mold growing on walls, noted Amanda Wilson, Worcester's director of housing and health inspections. The city has condemned a number of vacant homes for what it calls "chronic dampness," a broad heading under which the state sanitary code lumps all mold, fungi and water-related problems.

The white ranch house at 857 Grove Street Terrace, for example, has sat vacant and deteriorating for about a year on a street of otherwise well-kept, middleclass homes. Bank of America moved to foreclose on the property in summer 2009, and the house was vacated at some point prior to last winter, when water pipes burst inside the unheated home.

The city condemned the property as unfit for human habitation on Dec. 19, 2010, citing water damage and chronic dampness. Today, the backyard is overgrown and a sign posted on the front door warns unauthorized people to keep out. Neighbors said they've all but given up hope that somebody will buy the unsightly house anytime soon, especially with mold growing unchecked inside it for a year or more.

From a scientific perspective, mold is a catchall term for many kinds of fungi that need dampness and warmth to grow, said Dr. Richard Church, a clinical toxicologist at UMass Memorial Medical Center.

While claims of so-called "toxic mold" said to cause myriad serious symptoms from memory loss to chronic weakness have never been verified by scientists, Dr. Church said common mold can cause a severe allergic reaction in some people. Symptoms include itchy eyes, coughing, wheezing and difficulty breathing. People with established lung disease, especially the elderly, are at increased risk, he said.

"Their bodies aren't going to be able to clear that out of their lungs as well as a healthy person. It can lead to a localized pulmonary infection and then to a more systemic infection," Dr. Church said.

Most homes have some mold in them, especially older ones, and small amounts of mold spores in the air aren't cause for concern unless a resident is highly allergic, he said.

But in vacant, bank-owned houses with nobody living there to fix routine water leaks or to open windows for ventilation, mold can quickly get out of control rendering an otherwise decent house unfit for human habitation without a major mold cleanup.

In some cases, Mr. Mercer and his crews have to sand down and chemically treat the studs in a moldy part of a house after having ripped out all the carpet, wallboards and insulation. The work can take a week and cost \$10,000 or more in especially bad cases, and that doesn't include the cost of remodeling the stripped rooms.

"Mold is definitely a factor in many houses today," said Jo-Ann Szymczak, a real estate agent who teaches a seminar on buying foreclosed properties at Assabet Valley Center for Continuing Education. "Even when they tell you a house was winterized, some of them weren't done right."

As part of her class, Ms. Szymczak takes her students on a field trip to look at some foreclosed homes on the market. She tells her students to wear comfortable shoes, bring a flashlight and to brace themselves for just about anything. The tour can be a disturbing eye-opener for buyers looking to pick up a bank-owned house on the cheap.

"Sometimes we open the door and the smell is overwhelming. You know right away there's a mold issue," she said. "People can get some decent prices at good locations, but they shouldn't be naive about what it's going to take to fix them."