Family Living Focus

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WET BASEMENTS

Although it's early March, we could still have a lot of winter weather left. But the optimist in me is hoping for an early spring this year.

With spring, however, come rains and wet or even flooded basements. Some of you have already had to deal with the flooded basements this year.

What can you do to prevent wet basements? The most effective thing to do is to prevent the water from getting in to begin with. Start with the easy things to check or do. Are the gutters and downspouts clear? If not, then clean out the debris left over from last fall and the winter.

Consider installing a protective screen or other device to protect the leaves from accumulating. Icicles hanging from the gutters may have pulled them loose or bent them out of shape so that the water spills over or does not flow to the downspout.

Are the downspouts just dumping the water along the foundation? Use a splash block at the base of the downspout to prevent erosion of soil and to help direct the water away from the house.

Next check the grading around the house. The land surrounding the house should slope away from the foundation to direct the water away from the house. From the foundation to approximately six feet away, the surface should slope away at the rate of 1 inch per foot. The remainder of the yard should slope away at the rate of at least one foot per 25 feet.

Window wells should extend at least two inches above ground level, with the well bottom constructed to permit good drainage.

Any low spots that pond water within 10 feet of the basement wall should be filled or surface drainage provided. Decorative borders or edging around foundation plantings often trap and hold water against the foundation or divert it into the window wells. Proper drainage should be provided.

Driveways, sidewalks, and patios should slope away from the foundation because of the amount of runoff they accumulate.

If a home is adjacent to land higher in elevation, it may be necessary to divert the runoff by a grass-lined ditch or terrace.

Problems caused by subsurface water are generally more serious in nature and frequently require professional assistance. Quite often subsurface water that is putting pressure on basement walls must be removed by a subsurface drain. Generally, the drain should be at least four inches in diameter and covered with several inches of gravel. It may be possible to construct the subsurface drain in such a way that it empties on the surface.

For damp spots in the basement that are not condensation, the wall can be painted inside with a waterproof cement paint. If possible, it should be applied when there is no active leakage through the wall. Existing cracks should be filled before painting.

For severe problems, the most effective water proofing treatment is one which goes on the outside of the house. Unless installed during construction, however, digging a trench around the house to install a waterproof membrane or coating can be both expensive and dangerous. Water that makes its way to the foundation can push up against the membrane, but the foundation wall is behind it preventing the water from pushing its way through. On the other hand, a waterproofing coating or membrane installed in the inside has only air on the other side. It is, therefore, generally effective only for minor leaks.

Another approach is to accept the fact that the water is going to get into the basement and to put a channel around the perimeter wall of the basement directing the water to the sump pump.

For minor problems, a dehumidifier may be sufficient. For a dehumidifier to work effectively, it should be located in an enclosed room or area so that a constant new supply of humid air is avoided. Provide adequate space for air to circulate around the dehumidifier. The capacity of a dehumidifier is measured in pints of water removed from the air in a 24 hour period. Select a dehumidifier with a capacity appropriate to the room size and degree of dampness.

Each situation has its own set of unique conditions. Every homeowner can inspect his or her basement, foundation, and surface drainage to identify the likely cause of the problem. Many problems with wet basements can be dealt with through a few simple preventative measures.