

Q I recently purchased a weather vane to put on my chimney, but on reflection, I have delayed installation because I am concerned about the chances of a lightning strike on said vane, and damage to the chimney stack. Have you any advice about this?

Duncan Wright, Northallerton, North Yorkshire

A A weather vane is typically the highest conductive point on a building, and therefore attracts lightning to it. Installing a conductor cable from the weather vane to an earth spike will direct destructive electrical energy away from the building, but only if it is correctly sized and installed – Google “lightning protection installer” for Atlas-accredited companies.

The good news is, the chances of a strike are low. Taller objects near you, such as trees, are more likely to be hit. It's worth assessing the risks and/or protection from these. You should also check your home insurance policy to see what is protected against a strike, and if a weather vane is noted as an additional risk. Policies typically cover fire as a result of lightning, but don't cover damage to the structure or electronics damaged by a lightning power surge. Given that strikes are rare, you should weigh up the extra insurance costs against the value of potential losses.

Kieran Crowe, partner and energy engineer at Strutt & Parker estate agency; struttandparker.com

Q We live in a semi-detached house in the countryside. At the back of the pair of properties is a drive. Our neighbours access their part of the drive from our drive, which is next to a country lane. We park our two cars on the lane and leave the drive free to reduce any inconvenience to our neighbours, so they do not have to keep asking us to move our cars when they want to drive in or out.

When we have told them in advance that we are parking one car on our drive, they have been unhappy and stated that their deeds say they have “unobstructed access”. We have checked, and our deeds state that the neighbours have access to the property. I take this to mean I can park my car on my drive, but must provide access on request. What are our rights?

Anonymous, via email

A It sounds as though you are occasionally parking a car on land that you own, but over which your neighbours have a right of way. That is the case, they might have a claim against you if what you're doing amounts to a “substantial interference” with their legal rights.

You do not mention that the right of way is limited in any way, so I assume the neighbours have a vehicular or unrestricted right of access, but that would need to be checked. The next issue is: there space to get round your car, or an alternative route? How often do you leave a car there? How easily could the neighbours arrange access?

If you leave the car there regularly and there is no room to get another vehicle past, you are almost certainly causing an unlawful obstruction. Unless you can guarantee that you will be able to move it at a moment's notice at any time of day or night throughout the year, which I assume is unlikely, I doubt the court would accept a situation where access is provided only on request.

You should do what you can to maintain an amicable relationship with your neighbours. If you cannot agree an informal parking arrangement with them, I think you must keep the drive clear.

Ed Cracknell, senior associate at Russell-Cooke Solicitors; russell-cooke.co.uk



Do you need help from one of our experts? Email your questions to homehelp@homehelp-sunday-times.co.uk. Advice is given without responsibility.

Q What's the best kind of bird feeder for an urban garden in southwest London? I want to encourage birds, but stop squirrels and foxes getting at it. What food do you recommend?

AD, southwest London

A We'd recommend the RSPB Ultimate Easy-clean seed feeder (naturally), coupled with a guardian – a steel cage, wider in diameter than the feeder, that is placed over it to protect smaller birds from predators and prevent adult squirrels from accessing the food. The guardian can be hung from a hook or mounted on a pole, and it's easy to lift off when changing the food. The base of the guardian can be inverted to catch seed, too. Feeders start at £18, guardians at £16.

As for food, we suggest sunflower hearts, black sunflower seeds and any general seed mixes. This will ensure a great variety of birds, including blue tits, great tits, goldfinches and house sparrows, which are all regularly seen in your area.

rspbshop.co.uk



QUESTION OF THE WEEK

Q I live in a Victorian terrace made of stone (I'm unsure whether it's limestone or sandstone), and I'm looking for a product to bring it back to life. The stone is ingrained with soot and other airborne nasties that have adhered to it over its 100-plus years. I'm looking for the appearance of sandblasting without the expense. What do you suggest?

PD, Harrogate

A To clean or not to clean, that is the question when it comes to stone. It's a subject that polarises conservationists – on a par with the debate about whether to clean an Old Master. It's only been an issue since the industrial age, when the chimneys of factories, terraced houses and railway locomotives coated the nation in a film of black soot.

If you clean too thoroughly or use a commercial process, it will bleach out patina and character. When I look out of my office window in Harrogate and see a soot-stained Georgian house next to its sterile, clean neighbour, it's as though 200 years of history have been washed away.

The soot doesn't only add character: it provides a protective coating, too. It has become infused into the stone, so, when cleaned, the surface becomes friable and vulnerable to oxidation and bacteria, which can lead to further degradation.

To prevent this, it's important to do the work in summer, when the stone has a chance to dry, as this reduces bacteria. If you clean the house in winter, it won't dry out, so water will seep into the stone – and if there's

frost, the stone can spall (flake).

The best and safest way to clean your home is with buckets of warm water,

washing up liquid and a selection of scrubbing brushes – big ones and little ones for awkward details. Wet the stone first, then work from the ground up; this reduces the risk of streaks or stains. Get the stone soapy, but keep washing it down. This method takes a long time, but is the least intrusive.

For a stronger clean, combine baking soda and cream of tartar with vinegar (not on marble) or mix a paste of baking soda and water. Leave it on the stone for more than 24 hours – but first test it on a small area for a few hours, so you can see how clean this makes it look. Don't put the paste on too thickly or unevenly, otherwise you will end up with blotches of bleached stone.

If your stone is just dirty and green, a spray-on biocide/kitchen cleaner should be effective. Wet the surface first and wash it down with lots of warm water.

Finally, for an immediate effect with the least effort, try a bleach such as Domestos. Wet the stone first, wash with soapy water, then use a mix of bleach and warm water. Scrub in and wash off with more warm water.

My favourite commercial brand of stone cleaner is Namurian Pro Clean, by Conserv (from £13 a litre; lime-mortars.co.uk). Be careful, though: it works like bleach, so use gloves and protective clothing, and be wary of fumes.

Francis Shaw, managing director of Shaw & Jagger Architects; shawandjagger.com

TOP TIPS

A good knife makes light work of chopping, dicing and slicing. Here are the Good Housekeeping Institute's recommendations.

BREAD KNIFE

Anolon Advantedge Bread Knife, \$9/100; \$30; johnlewis.com
Simple yet functional design. The sharp blade is easy to control and slices cleanly. The handle is a soft-grip plastic that moulds to the hand. A heel guard stops you cutting yourself if your hands slip; the blade is a good size and shape for slicing.

CHEF'S KNIFE

Zwilling JA Henckels Pro Chef's Knife, 20cm, \$8/100; £90; uk.zwilling-shop.com
The sharp blade glides through cooked beef and is easy to control when chopping vegetables.

PARING KNIFE

Global NI Utility Knife, 14cm, \$5/100; £80; johnlewis.com
Well balanced, cuts easily and good for general control.

■ goodhousekeeping.co.uk/institute



Illustration: David Semple

home help

Whether you're worried about lightning strikes on your weather vane or dirty Victorian stone, our experts are here to offer advice