

QUESTION OF THE WEEK

Q I've got damp walls and the paint is peeling. What is causing this?

Andrew Munro, High Wycombe

A Damp has three main causes: rain coming from above; rising damp, where the damp-proof membrane has been bypassed; and burst pipes or badly capped-off old services.

Don't ignore any of these. Damp will eventually lead to rot – possibly dry rot – in roof timbers and floor joists, causing even more damage. Most 'falling damp' is caused by leaking gutters and downpipes or cracked flashings over eaves or wall tops. Many modern flat-roofed extensions fall where the roof meets the original wall: the life-span of roofing felt can be as little as 12 years. All of these require simple repairs that should be carried out by a good roofer or builder.

It may sound blindingly obvious, but rising damp is usually caused by bridging the damp-proof course (DPC). Many new landscaping schemes do this, with paving, tarmac or planters that allow moisture to gather above the level of the DPC. In older properties, modern cement render can bridge a slate DPC or, even worse, draw moisture up and trap it in the brick and stone.

A good way of dealing with damp is to dig a French drain – a small trench, 12-18in deep and 12in wide, ideally with an open drainage channel – then fill it with gravel.

If you live in an old building with damp, don't rush to have the plaster hacked off and the walls injected with chemical damp-proofing, then replastered with modern gypsum or cement render. No injection system works in stone, and in brickwork it usually lasts only 12 years. Instead, it's important to allow the old walls to dry out and breathe. If the moisture cannot escape, any work you do

internally may be of no use. If you need to replaster, use lime plaster where practical; it breathes and is much more forgiving when damp.

If you have a serious problem such as a watercourse nearby, tanking the walls with a waterproof render such as Sikka (sikawaterproofing.co.uk) may be your only option. This is often the best method of lining a cellar.

Always check the airbricks and ventilation around the perimeter walls. These can get blocked, leading to trapped moisture or even a way in for rainwater. Finally, you should keep all gutters clear. They often get blocked, which allows water to drip and penetrate the footings.

If you are in any doubt, talk to a building surveyor, an architect or a damp-proofing specialist.

Francis Shaw is a Harrogate-based architect; shawand jagger.com

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

Good news! Fogged-up bathroom mirrors, clogged showerheads and other bathroom problems can easily be fixed. Here's how...

■ **Blocked showerhead** Scrub using a liquid descaler and an old toothbrush. Steeping for two hours in a solution of equal parts white vinegar and water also helps to remove the scale deposits.

■ **Limescale on taps** Clean regularly with a dilute solution of washing-up liquid, then rinse and dry. Do not use abrasive cleaners. To remove heavy

TOP TIPS

limescale deposits, soak a cloth or paper towels in descaler or white vinegar and wrap around the tap. Leave for a few hours, then rinse and dry thoroughly. Don't use descalers or vinegar on gold- or brass-plated taps, as they can permanently damage the finish.

■ **Fogged mirrors** Wipe with a drop of neat washing-up liquid, then buff with kitchen paper to keep mirrors from misting up.

■ **goodhousekeeping.co.uk/institute**



Q Storm Katie blew my fence over. What should I expect to pay to fix it?
Grace Wilson, Surrey

A Fencing is vulnerable to wind damage, especially if old or rotten. In exposed locations, it is advisable to use heavy-duty slotted fence posts that can be dug deeper into the ground. Costs will vary across the UK, and depend on other factors such as the length and height of the fence,

materials, style, wooden or concrete posts, ease of access and whether there are any plants attached to the fence. Expect to pay £150-£300 a day. Most reputable companies will offer a no-obligation quote. **Steven Zackall is managing director of 0800handyman.co.uk**

Q Is there a way of touching up scuffs on Farrow & Ball estate eggshell without having to repaint the entire wall?
Cara Chester, Harrogate

A Don't we all love F&B? Spying Fleahant's Bar on your neighbours' plantation shutters is a sure sign that your area is moving up the property ladder. Recently, I was lured in by its beautifully chalky Brijnal Purple and used it in a hallway. Big mistake. Within days, it was scuffed and marked. No amount of patching was going to save it. So I'm afraid there is no solution other than repainting – but use its modern emulsion range instead. **Dan Hopwood is a leading interior designer, former head of the BILD and a television presenter, daniehopwood.com**

Q I have a dwarf *Buddleja 'Buzz'* plant in a pot. Do I hard-prune it like any other butterfly bush or leave it alone?
Jo Stott, Cambridge

A These mini-mes are the new butterfly bushes on the block. Instead of rampant growth, they put their efforts into a succession of red, blue or white flowers right through summer. Prune now by reducing the spindly ends back to a pair of strong buds 15cm out from the central branch framework. In summer, as container-grown plants run out of food, the length of the flowers shortens. When this happens, trim lightly to healthy leaves and top up with slow-release fertiliser granules. **Toby Buckland is a garden writer and the host of tobygardenfest.co.uk**

Q I am planning extensive building works. I often see portable loos outside homes, along with the skip. Is this now the done thing?
CRS, Goring-upon-Thames

A This is not your responsibility, but the builders'. They are required to make provision for their workmen to powder their noses. If the homeowner is happy to allow the workers into the house to use a lavatory, there is no requirement for a portable toilet. Few people, however, are prepared to agree to this unless there is an outside loo, or one close to the back door. **William Hanson is a leading etiquette coach, williamhanson.co.uk**



Illustration: Richard Hurren

Home help

If you've got a household problem, whether it's rising damp or a legal wrangle with a neighbour, our new team of experts are here to offer advice

Q Our neighbour is constructing an orangery. The hammer piling work undertaken for this over a three-week period has resulted in a lot of dust, and the constant vibrations have led to cracks appearing in the plaster in our newly decorated house. Can you advise me on my rights regarding redress?
Melissa Abrahams, north London

A As a general rule, if a neighbouring landowner does something on their land that causes damage to your property, you can claim compensation representing the cost of the repairs. If the work is still being done, put your neighbour on notice of the damage being caused and ask for the building progress to be stopped. If the works have finished, get a repair quote and make a written request for payment from your neighbour. If they claim not pay, a court order can be issued, in which you might need the evidence of a building surveyor to prove that the cracks were caused by the neighbour's works.

Ed Cracknell is a senior associate at Russell-Cooke solicitors, russell-cooke.co.uk