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What can you do about mold and mildew? Some advice

EDITOR'S NOTE: A reader asked Wednesday about controlling mold in her San Isidro de Heredia home. We got a lot of response:

A technological solution

Dear A.M. Costa Rica:

In response to the reader asking how to rid their home of mildew:

You may be interested in a relatively new technology called Atmospheric Water Generation. The machines, known as AWGs, are basically a combination of a dehumidifier, air cleaner and water purifier, but on steroids. A unit the size of an office cooler can pull up as much as 15 gallons of water per day out of your indoor air.



A.M. Costa Rica graphic

Use oil-based paints on walls

Dear A.M. Costa Rica:

I've been a fan of AWGs for several years now because they solve a number of problems that we face in today's world. They alleviate the strain on groundwater resources, do away with the waste created by bottled water, provide safe drinking water to communities that don't otherwise have access and help protect sensitive equipment from humidity. The water they produce is delicious.

Many AWG distributors would be happy to deliver machines to Costa Rica. I've created a Web page that provides further information, including a company directory. I'm not involved in the industry and make no money from the information that I provide:

<http://www.heidiallen.com/heartfire/water.htm#awgs>

Good luck beating your mildew problem!

Heidi Allen

Seal home in construction

Dear A.M. Costa Rica:

I'm not sure about white mildew, but there many types of molds that can grow on just about any surface. If your house is closed up and sealed off before the construction materials are dry, mildew gets started before you move in and can be difficult to get rid of.

I see lots of drywall being used in Costa Rica nowadays, which is a mistake unless you are going to air condition your house. Mildew gets on the back side due to condensation, or gets started in the taping and finishing process if the mud doesn't dry quickly enough.

Fans set up inside your house to dry problem areas out only spread the spores to places not yet contaminated. 3M makes a spray-on product called MARINE MILDEW INHIBITOR, which works pretty well on fabrics and other hard to clean surfaces. Academy Sporting Goods Stores carry it in the states.

Mike Jackson
Plantanillo

I designed and built my house and I also have had mold problems. Without looking at your house, it is hard to determine what is causing the moisture inside your home, but this is not supposed to happen and all new homes, by law, are guaranteed for five years against such defects in building. So your builder is responsible for fixing these problems. Moisture can be caused by roof leaks or the exterior walls not being properly sealed.

The best way to keep moisture out of your walls and house is to paint the exterior of the house with anti-fungus, oil-based paint. Many builders use cheap water-based paint which does not keep the moisture out. Also the roof needs to be checked for leaks during the rainy season. It is common to have small leaks in the roof from many different causes. If the edges of the roof are not properly sealed, you can also have water get into the exterior walls and seep down and start growing fungus inside the walls and pass moisture to the inside of the walls.

It is a good idea to paint all of the interior walls with anti-fungus, oil-based paint. Oil paint lasts longer, is easier to clean and helps to keep moisture out of the house. They also sell a liquid that kills fungus, which you can apply to the walls before you paint with the oil paint.

It is common for builders to use water-based paint on interior walls because it is cheaper and easier to work with, which keeps the builder's cost down. If you did not specify oil paint in the contract, you probably won't have much luck getting the builder to pay for repainting your house. But still, the cost of repainting your house is well worth investing in to make your house fungus free.

Fungus is a serious problem inside of a house and can cause serious health problems and can give you lung fungus which can kill you. So get professionals to fix your house as soon as possible, at any cost, it is worth investing in to protect your health.

Edward Bridges
Desamparados

Install vapor barrier

Dear A.M. Costa Rica:

Seal that concrete slab

Dear A.M. Costa Rica:

The mold problem is usually a result of water leaching into the slab and masonry walls from a lack of moisture barriers. Slabs should be poured upon at least a thick layer of plastic over a couple of inches of raked sand (sand will not pool water as easily and helps to prevent wicking). Any other kind of moisture block applied to exterior masonry surfaces is highly recommended. People tend to forget that construction here is block and therefore porous. It wicks moisture from the ground. I bet your reader's Florida house was framed in wood with sheet rock walls (also called dry-wall. Get it?). Moisture can easily damage expensive cabinetry work. Plumbing leaks may also contribute to the problem.

Ticos have not mastered moisture prevention, so the water works its way up through the slab and then into the tile and evaporates out of the grout lines. It's a battle to prevent it after the house has been built. To combat it requires open flame (no not burning the house down), light, bleach, air circulation, air purifier (make sure the air purifier is at least 50 percent higher in coverage than the area you wish to remove the mold), dehumidifier and a fire in the fireplace. Add some small fireplaces or even a modern freestanding wood burning stove.

A fireplace attached to the slab is best as the dryness caused by the fire helps eliminate the moisture from the slab (the source of the problems). Therefore prevents some of it from reaching the air inside the house. A wood burner dries the air only, so the fireplace gets to the cause before it results in damp air. Also regardless of the air temperature, have a fire every afternoon when it starts to get colder. Cold air does not hold water well so the water drops. That increases the humidity, so keep your doors closed at sunset and in the early evening and have a fire (ever notice that Ticos have fires around this time?). Use a nightly fire to maintain a low humidity level.

First prevent the problem by waterproofing anything that contacts soil. If it's too late to do that, then it's combat time. Stay ahead of the game by first drying out the house with a fire in the fireplace all night

The first and best thing to do is create a vapor barrier during initial construction. A plastic vapor barrier will help with the moisture and also prevent the interior and exterior paint from scaling. Additionally, a recirculating hot water system consisting of tubes under the cabinets and closets is a great solution. A small two-gallon hot water tank with a small pump to circulate the water about four hours a day will solve the problem. Also gun cabinet heaters work extremely well and can be purchased at EPA. See these links as they are about \$85 at EPA.

[Dehumidifier](#) [heater](#)

Tim Montz-Graham
San José

11-step program for mold

Dear A.M. Costa Rica:

No one ever mentioned the problems that Costa Ricans have with mold and mildew when we moved here. It took me awhile, but over the last two years I have gleaned knowledge from various people and resources to deter it.

The following are the best solutions that I have come up with in combating mold and mildew on the south Pacific coast:

1. NEVER use bleach or any water-based products to clean an item unless you thoroughly dry it in a humidity controlled environment. If an item is not completely dried, the chlorine eventually evaporates, but the water is left and that accelerates the mildew, starting the process all over again (one of my first mistakes).
2. Mildew and mold does not grow on petroleum products. To clean and preserve wood items use orange oil or any oil based cleaners. Unfortunately they are hard to find in Costa Rica, and I have had to bring various cleaners from the U.S. HyperMas does carry orange oil. I use mine in a spray bottle and mist the furniture, usually once a month will keep mold under control in the summer months.
3. Antimicrobial cleaners are great and the results last for a long time, but are expensive and need to be

long so the embers remain in the morning (have a bottle of saline solution spray for your nose as it going to get dry). Then use nightly fires along with the other gadgets. You can thank the architect who probably did not specify moisture barriers in the building plans for your new lifestyle.

Phil Baker
California

An expert's advice

Dear A.M. Costa Rica:

This letter is in response to your reader concerning mildew in his home. Without visually inspecting the area in question, it's hard for me to give your reader a specific answer. However, I can give them a generalized answer. First of all, what your reader is describing sounds like a variety of mold growth on the wood surfaces which I assume are finished. secondly, mold can grow on any finished surface if 1.) there is a food source and 2.) there is an available moisture source - high humidity levels or constant high dewpoints can also qualify as moisture sources.

I am assuming the house is open due to it's location and, therefore, if any sort of dirt (dust) or carbon particles flow into the house and attach themselves to any surface — either statically or topically — and there is enough moisture then mold will grow. (I personally have this problem at my home in Delaware during the summertime when the house is left open for long period of time without running the A/C.).

Closing the home and running a dehumidifier will help but only to a point if it is a concrete shell. The problem there lies in the fact that as the dehumidifier pulls moisture from the walls. It will be replaced by any moisture from the outside if the level is higher or the walls are wet and the concrete has not properly sealed. This is particularly acute during the rainy season of which this past one has been extremely bad.

The way to stop this is by reducing the vapor transmission thru the concrete. By doing this you can reduce or eliminate the available moisture in an enclosed area such as your home. I have noticed

brought in from the U.S. or Canada, but I highly recommend them if you can obtain them.

4. I put 3 coats of polyurethane on all of my wood and bamboo furniture. That completely stopped any and all of my mold issues on wood. It is a lot of work, but it was worth it to me. Note: if you choose that route, clean all of the furniture first with aguaras (available at all ferreterias) and dry it out thoroughly. If you do not, the mold will grow underneath the polyurethane and cause it to blister (experience is a great teacher!).

5. Run ceiling fans 24x7. Get as much air circulation in your house as you can.

6. If your closet is enclosed, buy closet heaters (2" cylinder tubes about 18" long – I think EPA now carries them) or low wattage closet lights (I have only seen them in the U.S.) to keep the heat up and the area dry. Also keep air spaces in between your clothing. Do not cram clothing tight in your closets.

7. DampRid® (available at EPA) is also great for enclosed areas such as closets and cabinets, but the area needs to be enclosed for effectiveness.

8. Put things that you do not use frequently in airless bags. The very best I have discovered are the AirSpace® bags where you extract the air out with your vacuum cleaner. As long as air is in items, they will continue to have a mildew smell especially if they are sealed for a period of time.

9. If an item can be waxed – do it! Ceramic tile and grout, especially in the shower or anywhere that comes in contact with water, is a great candidate. It cuts down on cleaning the shower as well as deterring mold and mildew in the grout.

10. Of course dehumidifiers are one of the very best things you can do on a whole house basis, but only if your house is "seal-able." If not, choose one or two rooms and use them to put all of the high risk mold items in there (paper products, wood items, clothing, etc.).

11. If you have paint on a wall that has uncontrollable mold, clean it with aguaras, let it dry, varnish over it and then repaint it, using a paint that has an anti-mold additive.

homes that have that moldy smell in the Jacó area due to this very reason - even with an A/C. Hopefully this will help your readers as I have seen that mold is becoming quite a problem in Costa Rica.

Mold and mildew is unavoidable when you live in Paradise. As my husband says, "live with it or get rid of the items that cause you grief."

Dawn Roberts
Playa Uvita

Note: There is a company in Costa Rica that can help with moisture problems in this area by the name of Sella-Tek S.A. They have been sealing and preventing moisture intrusion in buildings (mainly government and commercial) for over 12 years. I have personally seen their handiwork in Puerto Viejo de Limón on a house that was done about 10 years ago. It's still dry, and that's hard to near impossible to do on the Caribbean side.

Use anti-mold solution

Dear A.M. Costa Rica:

Tell the people in San Isidro to check in the U.S. for an enzyme-based anti-mold solution. Used in flour mills, for example, it will keep mold at bay for years. The enzyme activates benign (to people) bacteria

J.W. Neff which eats

Delaware/Puerto Viejo the mold. As long as there is food (mold), the bacteria and owner of Total Moisture Control thrives. When the mold is gone, the bacteria largely dies off. It's pretty effective.

George Freidkin
in Monteverde