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Citrus-based solvents help unstick residue

Steve **Maxwell**

Q How can I remove sticky residue spots from our composite deck?

We put down some self-sticking protective plastic sheets this summer, but now that we've taken them up again for the winter, there are gummy patches that attract and hold dirt. No amount of scrubbing has worked.

A I'd start with any of the citrus-based solvents or polishes out there. Many are quite good at removing stickiness of the sort you have.

All the formulations I've tried are very pleasant to use, too. If this doesn't work, it's time to get serious, and a unique product called Greensolv will almost certainly do the job.

Marketed as a paint stripper by Lee Valley Tools (800-267-8767; www.leevalley.com), I know from experience that this gel-like liquid is also terrific at removing stickers and the goop they leave behind. Just be sure not to use it on any finished surfaces, though.

It's highly effective at removing all kinds of coatings. In fact, it's the most effective paint stripper I've ever seen. Your composite deck surface should be just fine, but I'd test Greensolv in a hidden place first, just to be sure.

Q You've written about lightweight wood-splitting tools before, and now that I need to buy one, I can't find the information.

My husband has been diagnosed with cancer and I'd like to take over the necessary burden of splitting the firewood at our house.

Can you suggest something easier to use than an axe?

A There are a couple of products I recommend. The first is a hand-operated device called the Smart-Splitter, imported from Sweden by a company in Quebec (www.silvanatrading.com; 514-939-3523). Another product is an electric wood splitter made by Delta, model 38-610C.

I know it sounds chintzy, but this machine actually works quite well.

I've used one myself and for light and medium-duty splitting it can be a real help. You can find a dealer by calling 1-800-GO-DELTA.

Q How much attic insulation is enough? A friend suggested that with high and rising energy costs, the best return on my home improvement dollar is to increase my attic insulation so it's between 16 and 20 inches deep. Is this true?

A In the case of older homes, boosting attic insulation levels is often the best investment you can make for energy savings. Doubling insulation levels cuts attic heat loss in half. There are other variables you need to look at too, like the state of your windows and the overall tightness of the house, but for most people in a home built 20 years ago or more, attic insulation is the way to start.

And even in a brand new home, the insulation depths you mentioned might not be far off economically optimum levels. I've never seen any credible analysis on what constitutes unnecessarily deep insulation, but I suspect it's higher than the minimum levels required by building codes.

And with brand new houses, don't assume you actually have the insulation you're supposed to.

Check to see that coverage is consistent and at least 10 to 12 inches deep. Blowing insulation into an attic space is the easiest and most effective approach to upgrade. You can either choose cellulose or fibreglass for this purpose.

Fibreglass is generally regarded as being of slightly higher quality. It costs a bit more, but it's also less likely to settle over the years. A typical attic insulation top-up job should cost between \$500 to \$700, depending on size and current insulation levels.

When upgrades are complete, check to make sure soffit vents along the sides of your attic remain open and unobstructed.

Q What should I make of shallow areas of standing water on my newly installed flat roof? There's some shallow puddling left around the edges, and the lip of the central drain is 1/4-inch higher than the surrounding roof surface.

I always thought that a flat roof should drain completely, but my contractor says that standing water is actually a good thing since it helps the roof last longer by keeping it cool. What's true?

A Standing water on a flat roof is called ponding, and a small amount of it is acceptable. The rule of thumb recommended by Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC) is this: If ponding remains for less than 48 hours during warm, dry weather, then it's not an issue.

But if the water is deep enough to last longer, then it may shorten roof life. Trouble is, rectifying such drainage problems usually requires a complete rebuild. And from your description, it doesn't sound like the standing water is a problem.

Steve Maxwell is technical editor of Canadian Home Workshop magazine. Send questions to smaxwell@onlink.net. Letter volume may prevent individual response.

Illustration(s):

STEVE MAXWELL PHOTO Shaped like a large gas-powered model, the Delta electric wood splitter does a remarkably good job for such a small machine. Current cost is \$499. The Smart Splitter is a Swedish invention that makes it safe and easy for anyone to split firewood. Cost is \$225. The Smart Splitter is a Swedish invention that makes it safe and easy for anyone to split firewood. Cost is \$225.

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