

Gutter Cleaning: The In's and Out's of Rims & Spouts

by Allison Hester



Photo courtesy of Mark Cave, Mr. Clever Clean, www.MrCleverClean.co.uk

As this month's cover article already explained, gutter cleaning is a necessity for homeowners who want to protect their property. Again, the best option for homeowners is to hire a professional. (See "Why Clean Gutters Matter" on page 5 for more on this.)

But, what are the best gutter cleaning options for professional contractors?

To help us figure this out, I developed a 15-question survey for industry members, then followed up with a few interviews. Within a couple of days of the survey being announced, I received more than enough responses to help me gain a better understanding of the gutter cleaning market. (Thanks to all of you who participated.) The following is based off of these findings, along with some additional research.

When to Clean

Fall tends to be the primary season for gutter cleaning, with Spring coming in a close

second, which corresponds with the times that the majority of leaves, seedlings, buds, pine needles, and acorns fall, clogging the gutters. These are the primary types of items – although generally decaying and sloppy – that need to be removed. However, contractors have seen it all – trees, ferns, cacti, golf balls, bird nests, dead birds, dead rats, live snakes, fire ants, bee hives, and the list goes on and on.

Roof granules are another problem, and one that can be a pain to remove. While mud and decay can be scooped out and disposed of, granules have to be gathered together then scooped (depending on the amount) or flushed out with water for smaller quantities.

As mentioned in the cover article, getting a maintenance contract is the best option for professional cleaners and homeowners alike. This helps keep the gutters working properly, and makes the gutter cleaning job easier. Providing a discount for regular maintenance

may be something worth considering.

For example, Mike Dingler of Firehouse Power Washing in Senoia, Georgia, estimated a gutter cleaning job for \$125, but the customer asked Dingler if would discount it to \$100 if he agreed to have his gutters cleaned regularly. Dingler agreed and has been cleaning the customer's gutters almost monthly for the past two years. "The only months he does not want them done is in June and July, which is when I wash his house and driveway for more money," he added. "It just goes to show you that occasionally a 'one time' gutter cleaning can turn into a \$1500 a year account."

How to Price

While around 75 percent of those who responded will offer gutter cleaning services alone, one-fourth only provide gutter cleaning in conjunction with other cleaning services. Part of this is because gutter cleaning can make a mess of the house and windows. Another aspect is that some people just don't like doing it. A few also mentioned they will throw in gutter cleaning for free to residential customers who buy larger cleaning packages from them.

"Gutters that are clogged and packed with mud and mold are very hard to clean while keeping the rest of the property spotless," explained Tyr Denlinger of Pacific Window Cleaning Company in Wailuku, Hawaii. "If I can't negotiate a fair price on other types of cleaning with this type of customer, I'm sometimes better off just passing on the job."

While most contractors agree that you never know what you're going to find in a gutter, not everyone figures in how dirty the gutters are when giving a price. In fact, almost half of those who answered do not include this in their estimates.

Pricing is figured several ways. Most start with the linear footage, then also factor in how many stories high the gutters are. Some stop there. Others will look at the pitch of the roof to see if roof access is possible. Still others try to figure out how dirty the gutters are, either through a customer questionnaire, by examining the property – and how much foliage

surrounds the house – or by actually visually inspecting the gutters. (This last option is the exception, not the norm.)

"I have a webpage dedicated to gutter cleaning, so customers can familiarize themselves with us and the process before they call. I ask several questions about the height of the house, the size of the house, the type and pitch of the roof, maintenance history of gutters, travel distance to the site, and so on. I occasionally ask for photos emailed or texted to me, then I quote over the phone nine out of 10 times," explained Bill Feil of GutterX in St. Charles, Missouri. "Some projects require a visit to examine the site before a firm price is possible."

"It's also important to look at the condition of the gutters and downspouts," stressed Bill Schoenherr of BF Home Services in Rochester, New York. "Are they pitched properly? Are the hangers all secure?"

This is a really important point, and one that Frank Franzoi of Hydroclean in Brighton, Michigan, learned the hard way. "While cleaning the front of a home, I was midway through when the whole section collapsed and fell to the ground. The homeowner was aware of this and expected it, but I still fixed the situation even while the homeowner was raving mad and threatening to sue. They have not called nor have I heard from an attorney. I guess being nice paid off in the long run."

Another reason to inspect the gutters is because you never know you're going to have to remove.

Matt Schaltenbrand of Advanced Pressure and Gutter Cleaning, Inc., in Marietta, Georgia,



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Photo courtesy of Curtis Lambert,
Lambert/Martin Power Washing & Glass, Cranston, RI

obtained a contract through a third party that included cleaning the gutters of 200 buildings. “When we got there, it was all trash on the roof – not organic debris. We had to bag and haul thousands of pounds to dumpsters over about four days. To top it off, we never got paid as the middle subcontractor took the money and ran.”

Almost everyone – around 90 percent – agreed that they charged more for cleanings when gutter protection systems were in place.

“I do one each year that has covers that don’t work well,” said Dan Wagner of Dan Wagner Window Cleaning in Honesville, Penn. “Each section has several screws holding them in place. They are very hard to remove and get worse each year.”

“One of our first jobs was a single level home that had mesh gutter guards that were not working to well,” said Curtis Lambert II of Lambert/Martin Window Cleaning in Cranston, RI. “The gutter beds were full of bird poop, mud, twigs, leaves... you name it. We got through it, but learned just how to let our customers know what to do to fix their problem.” In his case, Lambert upsells and installs the Rain Flow Gutter Protection System.

Ironically, one of the biggest complaints by contractors about gutter cleaning is that they have undercharged for jobs. That’s why some prefer to charge an hourly rate. That way if there are surprises, at least they are getting paid to deal with them.

The Cleaning Process

(Note: this article focus on the interior of cleaning gutters only. For external cleaning, and the removal of “tiger stripes,” see the article on page 14.)

One of the primary things contractors wanted to know was if there was a good way to clean the interior of gutters from the ground. Unfortunately, if there is, I didn’t learn about it, especially on multi-story homes. A few people have come up with ways to clean first-story gutters from the ground by using vacuums or pressure washers and special gutter attachments.

Two specific products were mentioned. First, a couple of contractors liked the GutterBall -- a special gutter cleaning nozzle that attaches to a pressure washer. The only complaint was that the Gutter Ball created a mess on the ground. (We posted an article about the Gutter Ball back in January 2012 that you can [read on our website](#).)

Another item that was mentioned was the Gutter Blaster, which is a special bent wand

and nozzle that attaches to a garden hose. There are other similar products on the market.

However, in most cases, cleaning from the ground simply doesn't do as good a job as cleaning from a ladder or rooftop. In fact, in many cases, scooping the gutters out by hand is simply the professional method of choice.

When not working from the ground, most contractors do the majority of their gutter cleaning work from a ladder. Because ladder safety is such a huge issue, we are going to produce a separate resource – due out later this month – dedicated to this topic. However, it is imperative to say that a ladder standoff stabilizer attachment needs to put in place any time ladder work is being done. Ladder-Max was the brand mentioned by a few.

“Using the Ladder-Max standoff attached to the top of the ladder means that you are letting the feet of the standoff rest on the shingles and stabilizing the ladder. It is a lot safer than just leaning an extension ladder against a gutter, in which case the ladder could travel and one could fall to the ground,” explained Chris Thompson of Attention to Detail Window Cleaning Bottineau, ND. “The other benefit is

that it prevents you from scratching the face of the gutter, which happens when leaning the ladder against the gutter.” Thompson also pointed out the need for using leg levelers at the base of any extension ladder.

Another ladder tip is one that Glenn Iglar of Enviroclean Pressure Washing in Atlanta learned the hard way. “If you leave the ladder to work on the roof, make sure the ladder is secure. On several occasions when I first started, I was on the roof with the wand and hose, and the hose caught the ladder and knocked it down. Fortunately, there were some nice folks nearby that put it back up for me so I could get down.”

While most work is done from ladders, roof work is generally preferred to ladder work when possible. “I like to stay safe, and as ironic as it sounds, the roof is a lot safer than a ladder, especially when using tools like a pressure washer to clean gutters,” explained Dingler. “Back pressure is created when you pull the trigger, and it can slide the ladder down the gutter and result in a fall.”

Walking the roof allows for the use of additional tools, like a leaf blower. “You'll want

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Bucket of gutter debris. Courtesy of Tim Fields, Complete Power Wash, Hagerstown, Maryland, www.CPSoftwash.com

as the “Gutter Grabber” were particularly popular choices when doing ladder work. “On two story homes, Zach will set the ladder at the downspout end to make sure that it is clear and then move the ladder 10 or 12 feet down the gutter,” said Fields. “After resetting the ladder, he uses an eight-to-16-foot extended pole with a WCR (Window Cleaning Resource) gutter tool on the end, pulling from about 12 feet in each direction, placing the contents in the bucket.” This allows them to clean as much as 24 feet of gutter with only one ladder set up. When Zach reaches the far end of the gutter, he uses a pressure hose with a ball valve attached and flushes the gutter and downspout with water.

something that is gas powered and commercial grade. I have an ECHO, but STIHL makes a good product as well,” said Thompson. “You want a backpack blower because it is safer and they have more power than a handheld. A gas powered is also safer than an electric, since there is not a chance of tripping over the electrical cord while walking on the roof.”

Beyond these items, there are no real magical tools of choice either. Buckets. Brushes. Extension poles. Scoops. Those were the most common tools mentioned. But a lot of cleaning is done by hand.

“Most gutters that my son Zach cleans contain wet contents, so the cleaning is done by hand and the contents are placed in a bucket,” explained Tim Fields, owner of Complete Power Wash in Clear Spring, Maryland. “On walkable ranchers, he scoots along the roof’s lower edge on his hands and knees, hand scooping the contents into buckets.”

A couple of bucket related tips. First, several recommended using some sort of hook so the bucket can hang safely and free up the technician’s hands. Thompson also suggested attaching a rope to the bucket using a dog leash clip so you can lower the bucket down safely to the ground from the roof or ladder.

Marc Cournoyer of Comes a Time Powerwashing in Canton, Ohio, averages 10 houses a day doing everything by hand. “We call it a ‘white glove service’ and we actually wear white Atlas gloves.” All collected debris goes into five-gallon buckets and is dumped either in the woods or in the back of the truck.

Extension poles with scoops or tools such

Wes Buckner of Mid-Ohio Window Cleaning in Galion, Ohio, uses gutter scoops, but also has created some homemade tools to assist in gutter cleaning. “I have a tool to help drag or push debris from under one section of gutter cover so I only have to remove every other section to clean the gutter.” However, there is no “golden ticket” when it comes to gutter cleaning tools. “I haven’t really found that one tool works better than the other because you have so many different circumstances that come into play. You have to diversify. What works for one job may not work for the next.”

Cleaning the Downspout

Perhaps the most important aspect is ensuring the downspout is working properly. Some prefer to get the downspout flowing first thing, while others tackle that feat last.

Generally, contractors will use a water hose to determine how well the downspout is flowing, then remove any clogs. Contractors usually begin by attempting to push any debris inside the downspout downward – using a hose and nozzle, a pressure washer, a sewer snake, or a leaf blower – until it all comes out the other end.

“I unclog downspouts two different ways – either with a long snake-like metal device that goes down the downspout to push leaves and debris out,” said Jeff Stifnell of Jeff’s Window Cleaning in Green Lane, Penn. “Or, if the clog is really bad, I disassemble the downspout,

remove the clog and reassemble everything.

“That’s why it’s important to always carry a cordless drill with a ¼-inch hex driver,” said Billy Gallagher of Wm Gallagher Gutter & Window Cleaning Inc., in Fort Washington, Penn. Next, “disassemble the elbows because this is usually where the clogs are.”

Another tip from Keith Ayotte, Top Notch Soft Wash LLC, West Brookfield, Massachusetts: “Always have tools with you! You never know when something might happen that you weren’t planning on, like a down spout falling or gutter caps coming off.”

Gutter Cleaning Wisdom

Gutter cleaning gets easier with time and experience, but you always have to expect the unexpected. “I’ve had tough ones have been frozen. Downspouts packed solid that you had to take apart. Underground drains that are plugged. Some installed so tight to the roof that you can’t get your hands into them. Some with bee and wasp nests, and probably about

20 other things,” said Rick Swope of Grime Busters LLC in Cement City, Michigan. “But it all goes with the job.”

“We all can share an experience of gallons of smelly gutter water gushing on top of us after taking a drain assembly apart,” added Ron Perks of Perks Window Cleaning Ltd. in West Vancouver, BC. “The busy season is coming up. It’s best not to think of it.”

Gutter cleaning, unfortunately, is one of those markets that is filled with lowballers. As with other cleaning services, the key is to differentiate your company through professionalism – maintaining liability and workers comp insurance, ensuring downspouts are working properly, not leaving a mess on the yard, and showing up when scheduled.

And again, experience is going to become more valuable than any gutter cleaning gadget on the market. “Just like pressure washing, with proper training, a good crew can handle many jobs easily in one day,” added Schaltenbrand. “Some specific tools can be used, but it’s more about the skill of the tech.”

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