

Before

After

Tiger Stripes

Safely Getting Rid of Those Ugly Black Streaks on Gutters

by Allison Hester

Photo courtesy of Jon Gutowski, Total Pressure Washing, www.totalpressurewashing.com

Ever wonder what causes those ugly black streaks on the outsides of gutters and why they are so hard to remove?

Those streaks – often referred to by industry members as “tiger stripes” – are actually

caused by a chemical reaction that occurs between the asphalt from roof shingles and the aluminum in the gutters. “The gutter manufacturer anodizes the aluminum to get paint to stick,” explained Mike Taylor, owner of Absolute Chemical in Nashville, Tennessee, which manufactures a number of house wash, gutter cleaning and wood staining products. Not only are different brands of gutters anodized differently, “the same gutter manufacturer’s process may vary from batch to batch.” Depending on the process, the paint may easily come off when cleaning gutters if the wrong product or wrong mixing ratio is used. In other words, there is no magic mixing ratio when it comes to gutter cleaning chemicals; each job is unique.

The black streaks are not simply stains, and therefore can’t be removed with traditional housewashing chemicals that remove mold or mildew. The asphalt actually creates an electrostatic bond with the aluminum – much the same way that road film sticks to fleets – and the bond must be broken in order for the stains to be removed.

A lot of contractors use various forms of butyl-based products, which basically means various degreasers. When these butyl-based products are diluted with water, they lose their strength rapidly. In other words, these products have to be mixed pretty hot to work

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correctly, and the hotter the mixture, the more likely to remove paint from the gutters, and the more dangerous it is for workers.

While butyl-based products work, it's also easy for contractors to accidentally take the paint off of gutters while removing the black streaks. "I've had to send my technicians back to a customer's home with a can of spray paint," admitted Mike Hockman of Gutter Dogs in Maryland. "Those Home Depot gutters are the worst for this."

A few companies have successfully come up with alternatives to butyl-based products. One item that is quite popular (according to our industry survey) and has gained a strong reputation for working is Gutter Grenade (F13) by Pressure Tek. (See the ad on this page for more information on how to purchase this product.) A mild potassium hydroxide-based solution that was developed almost 10 years ago, Gutter Grenade removes the oxidation layer of the paint where the streaks are trapped through electrostatic bonding. However, Gutter Grenade will not remove the paint on gutters unless the paint has completely failed, meaning it has oxidized through the whole paint layer – which is rare.

When working with Gutter Grenade, contractors should keep the siding under the gutters wet with water and avoid dripping Gutter Grenade on the siding without rinsing it off relatively quickly. Otherwise, Gutter Grenade will create clean streaks on the siding where it dripped. The average mix strength is 10-1, but can be effective with as little as a 20-1 mix. The strongest it needs to be is 5-1. Contractors should also wear safety glasses and gloves when working with the product. F13 is safe for plants, although they should be pre-wet for protection. You may want to cover flowering plants.

Another product that is really just being introduced to the general cleaning market (although it's been available to their local customers for a few years) is Absolute Chemical's Citrus Gutter Cleaning and Housewash. (See the ad on page 14 to learn more about where to get this product.) "We've sold Gutter Shock – our butyl based product

– for years, but I wanted to take a step back and see if we could come up with a safer solution that would remove gutter striping without messing up the paint and without all the dangerous chemicals that are in traditional cleaners," explained Taylor. "We've come up with a solution that really works – and it's safe."

The Chemical's Citrus Gutter Cleaning and Housewash contains d'limeonene, which not only is a good cleaner, but also leaves behind a pleasant odor for the customer. The product can also be diluted and used as a housewash.

The good news about tiger stripes is that they can be removed, and they can be removed without destroying paint or putting workers at risk.

"It's important to understand, however, that these are not just like every other stain you find on a home," Taylor concluded. "You have to attack them in a different manner, and being able to educate your customer about this will help set you apart from your competition as well."



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