

Tackle problems early — or get out your wallet

By [BILL GARWOOD](#)

For the Journal-Constitution

Published on: 07/13/04

I have the occasional misfortune, because of the nature of my work, of inspecting houses with large numbers of costly problems. When this happens, my clients inevitably ask me how they could have avoided the problems and how they can do better in the future.

Although many problems with houses are hidden to the untrained eye, the average buyer can usually avoid a real lemon by paying special attention to a few areas where problems are often readily apparent.

- **Worn roof shingles:** Look for shingles that are curling on the edges or slipping out of position. Replacement of shingles typically costs several thousand dollars.
- **Poor maintenance:** There are basically two conditions that determine whether or not a house is a good one: the quality of original construction and how well the house has been maintained. Some signs of poor maintenance are overgrown trees and shrubbery, peeling paint and rotted exterior wood. As well as being potentially expensive to repair, the existence of any of these conditions makes me wonder what problems are hidden under the surface.
- **Water entry into basements and crawl spaces:** When shopping for a home, it is natural to concentrate on the kitchen, living room, bathrooms and bedrooms. We have a tendency to avoid those areas that will be used less frequently, such as basements, crawl spaces or attics. It is in basements and crawl spaces, however, that we can find evidence of potentially expensive water entry problems. Buyers would be wise to peek in the crawl space and look for standing water. In the basement, look for staining (dark areas) on the foundation walls, or mud lines on the floor. These are indications of current or previous water entry. Also look in the attic with a flashlight for water staining on the roof decking. Water staining indicates past or present leaks.
- **Structural problems:** Although many structural problems are not apparent, some serious problems are easy to see. When you are in the basement looking for water entry, look at the foundation walls for cracks. Cracks will typically be vertical, step type (following the mortar joints in block walls) or horizontal. Surprisingly, horizontal cracks are often the worst. A horizontal crack in a block foundation wall may indicate a structural failure requiring expensive repairs.
- **Defective siding:** Many of the composition wood sidings used in the last 30 years have been found to be defective, resulting in class-action lawsuits and settlements. Composition sidings that are swelling along the edges, at the joints or around nailheads may need replacement. Replacing all the siding on a house often costs between \$10,000 and \$20,000 depending on the size of the house.

Send home repair questions to Ask the Inspector at H&G@ajc.com. Because of the volume of mail, not all questions can be answered. Our expert, Bill Garwood, spent 15 years as a building contractor before becoming a home inspector in 1990. He is part owner of a residential inspection firm and a company providing training in building inspection and codes.