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EXCLUSIVE REPORTS

Hounded by mold, some go to the dogs

Cindy Barth
Managing Editor

DAYTONA BEACH -- Mold may have met its match in Copper and Jack.

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The yellow Labrador retriever and Jack Russell terrier are Central Florida's first mold-detecting dogs, two of only 30 certified "mold dogs" in the country.

"For years, we've been using dogs to detect drugs or to find the source of suspected arson," says Hank Nolin, president of Sun State Specialty K-9, the Daytona firm now using the spore-sniffing canines. "So we thought, why not train dogs to find mold? It was a logical next step."

On the job

Florida is among those Southeastern states with especially persistent mold problems, notes Neil Moyer, a principal research engineer with the Florida Solar Energy Center. "Mold is pretty much everywhere," says the scientist.

In fact, Moyer says, any homeowner can walk outside his or her house and have a good chance of seeing mold in one form or another on parts of the house.

"That greenish or blackish stuff you sometimes see along the foundation or on other parts of the house, that's just common mold," Moyer says.

The "bad molds" affecting homeowners include such tongue-twisters as stachybotrys, penicillium, aspergillus and cladosporium.

The fungi are widely believed to cause everything from chronic sinus problems to

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kidney problems.

According to the Centers for Disease Control in Atlanta, there is no data available that proves conclusively mold is a public health hazard or at what levels it becomes toxic.

Even so, insurers report waves of new mold-related claims. By fourth-quarter 2002, Allstate Insurance Co. reported a 25 percent increase in mold-related claims in Florida. State Farm reported mold claims nearly quadrupled during the same time frame. The result: Mold detection is a cottage industry.

Hidden problems

What makes mold detection inside the house tricky is the fact that it frequently grows in hidden places -- behind wall linings, in floors or behind installations.

Says Nolin, "Copper and Jack can get to places faster than people, detect mold in places people can't reach and pinpoint areas that may have been missed by other kinds of searches."

Bill Whitstine, owner of New York-based MoldDog, a canine training company, and the trainer of Copper and Jack, cites one case where a mold-plagued homeowner tore out all the carpet, drywall and wallpaper -- and wound up sick again about a month later.

Again, the house was remediated for mold.

And again, the owner was sick in about a month.

"The problem sometimes with the old way is that you can detect mold but you don't know what the specific source of it is," says Whitstine. "You don't want just the tip of the mold iceberg -- you want the whole iceberg."

Sniffing out problems

Dogs can be trained to sniff out as many as 18 different kinds of mold.

Not every pup is up to the 800 to 1,000 hours of training, though.

Whitstine, who rescues most of the dogs he trains from the Humane Society, says he's had success with Labradors, border collies, Jack Russell terriers and beagles.

His favorite breed? Mutts. "Most of these dogs just want something to do," Whitstine says. "They genuinely seem to be happiest when they're working."

Each mold dog has a handler who also goes through a 40-hour course to learn how to lead the dog and interpret the dog's signals when on

like choosing a wife
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the job.

At the places where the dog marks a mold odor -- typically by stopping and pointing with its nose -- samples are taken for analysis.

A mold dog typically can check for problems in a 2,500-square-foot home in about 30 minutes.

Using traditional methods, checking out a five-room house could run upward of \$30,000. A commercial building can easily run into the high six figures per floor, says Whitstine.

The dog can do the residential job for about \$5,000 to \$6,000.

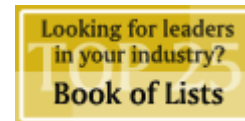
It was that cost factor, in fact, that has prompted insurance companies to contact Whitstine.

Now, both Whitstine and Nolin say they can barely keep up with inquiries.

"It's really great to get up in the morning and as soon as you put on your shoes and grab your briefcase, the dog knows he's going to work," Nolin says. "I get to go to work every day with my best friend."

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