



Mold 101

Mold and mildew have long been nagging issues for boaters and owners of patio furniture with cushions that stay outside in all kinds of weather. One of the most compelling features of Sunbrella brand fabrics is their resistance to mold and mildew, especially when the fabric is well maintained by brushing and hosing off loose dirt and other particles. In our Mold 101 article, Roger McAfee, a noted expert on mold, gives a brief review of “exactly what is mold” and the best ways to rid your space of it. He highly recommends the use of bleach, which can damage most fabrics; But not Sunbrella! So continue on and learn more about this annoying little spore we know as “mold”.

From Roger McAfee:

Mold, mildew and their resulting health hazards are a growing problem in North America. As far back as 1999 the Mayo Clinic estimated that more than 40 million people in North America suffered sinus infections directly connected to mold and mildew.

Other studies have attributed the rapid rise in asthma over the last 20 years to the effects of mold. The adverse health effects of mold continue to rise. Yet most people, including many health care workers, simply don't understand it.

Molds are minute, hardy spores, so small it has been estimated that one square foot of normal drywall will contain 300 million of them when the drywall is fully colonized. We usually recognize the presence of mold and mildew by the greyish/white “fuzz” we see on any object when mold is present. Mold spores are so light they can hang in the air for days and can drift on the wind the entire north-south distance of the U.S. in a week. They are so tough they have been known to survive frozen for 40 years and still be capable of “doing their thing.”

“Their thing” is to digest the organic world as it dies. Without mold, dead or fallen trees would never decay and disappear. Grass clippings and other garden clippings would never compost and dead birds, animals and insects would pile up. Without mold the world would quickly fill up with dead, unpleasant things. Molds are, therefore, one of nature's most powerful recycling tools! Given the job they have to do they have to be tough and numerous.

Each single mold spore contains all the DNA required to reproduce. To grow and thrive all it needs is water and food. Unlike almost all other living things, mold spores don't need light to live or grow. Mold spores can get their moisture either from liquid water that leaks around fittings, taps, and drains, or from water vapor in the air.

As mold spores waft through the air, they bang into objects, such as furniture, walls or ceilings, and if those objects are dry, they rebound and move along. If, however, the object they bump into is wet, and if they remain there 24 hours, they “hatch” egg-like and begin to grow. First a single “arm” (called a hypha) pokes out of the shell, octopus-like, and starts to feed on microscopic dirt, food or even paint on the object. Then, from that arm, more arms begin to grow, and more from them, and so on.

If mold gets a start in any cushioned material, the cushions will have to be junked. If it gets started in padded objects such as sofas, the padding will have to be tossed. A similar fate awaits mattresses, carpeting, bedding and clothing. Many objects that bill themselves as “mold resistant” may be constructed of material that resists mold but the stitching does not. As a result mold “digests” the stitching and then gets to the interior of the object. That usually results in another trip to the dumpster.

Cleaning up noticeable mold can be done with a diluted solution of water (90%) and ordinary household bleach (10%). The moldy surface should be scrubbed with the solution, rinsed thoroughly with fresh water and allowed to dry.

It should be noted that using bleach on many fabrics will discolor or even destroy them. Care must be taken to make sure the fabric, and it's stitching, can withstand the bleach. Using a mold resistant fabric that can withstand bleach, complete with similar stitching, is one way to make sure expensive sofas, patio cushions, and the like, do not have to be junked if they do start showing mold.

Addendum: Please see the Care and Cleaning section of the Sunbrella web site for more information on cleaning Sunbrella with bleach. Also, Roger McAfee's book "The Warm Dry Boat" is available for more extensive information on boat care as it relates to mold.



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