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Water Flow Problems In Older Homes

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Water Flow in Older Homes

By: Patrick Breen

In last month's article I discussed household water pressure and some common remedies for increasing the PSI (pounds per square inch) in your home. The focus was directed primarily on the pressure servicing the structure, what is considered within normal range, and some steps you can take to increase your water flow. But, not all problems with pressure and flow rates originate at the service line. If you happen to live in an older, 50 plus year home, the diminished water flow inside your structure could very well be caused by clogged steel pipes. For decades, leading up to the 1950s, the common water line installed was galvanized steel pipe.

The problem is that a reaction between water and the steel pipe precipitated mineral deposits within the horizontal lines. A second problem with steel pipes is at the connections. Oftentimes those pipes were cut, exposing metal edges that are not galvanized. Over time corrosion occurs at those connections, eventually causing a leak.

If you live in an older home with steel galvanized pipes, and you have water flow issues, the most likely cause is restricted lines full of mineral deposits. If you want to replace some of those pipes with copper I would begin with the horizontal lines in your basement. I would also recommend replacing as many steel pipe connections as you can reach - under sinks, connections to water heaters, etc.

Remember, when making the connection between your copper fittings and steel pipe to use a dielectric converter. This is simply a union with a polymer lining that keeps these two dissimilar metals from touching. When dissimilar metals such as copper and steel are in direct contact with each other electrolysis occurs that will corrode the metal and over time cause a leak.

Now, if you're really ambitious and want to replace some vertical water lines as well you might want to consider using flexible polyethylene instead of copper. Most commonly referred to as PEX (cross-linked polyethylene), this is widely used in today's newer home construction. Advantages to using PEX are that it is less expensive than copper and, especially in this instance, the tubing can be threaded between wall cavities and around existing obstacles easier than a ridged copper pipe.

Flexible water lines got a bad rap when earlier installation used a polybutylene product that reacted with some chemicals in water such as chlorine. The pipes would become brittle and eventually would fail causing water damage. The installation of polybutylene took place during the late 70s up until as late as 1995. Since that discovery a much better product, polypropylene has emerged, oftentimes preferred by some contractors over copper. Whichever route you decide, don't be daunted by the task. Most older homes have unfinished basements with all the horizontal pipes fully exposed, and the effort to replace them will be much easier than you think resulting in all the water flow and pressure you need.