

MOLD or MILDEW?

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What is the difference between mold and mildew, or is there a difference? This question, though simple, is often confusing to a person trying to resolve a household problem involving one of the two. Mold and mildew basically have the same goal, to thrive on and devour or break down an organic object. Mold and mildew are often referred to in the same sentence. Neither is in the plant or animal family and both are considered fungi that have enzymes used to break down organisms. They both reproduce by spores. Mold and mildew are important in our environment as they eat away old trees and decompose things that are dead and we don't want around. They both become a problem when they start thriving in our homes, degrading building materials away.

The definition of mildew is dependent upon who you are speaking with. If you are speaking to a scientist who deals with plants, he will describe mildew as something that attaches to a plant and decomposes it such as powdery mildew or downy mildew. Powdery mildew is commonly found on roses and other flowering plants. Powdery mildew is created by an ascomycota type of fungus. Downy mildew is from the oomycota type of fungus and is found in agricultural products such as grapes and potatoes. To a plant scientist mildew grows on living plants outdoors.

There is a difference between the scientific use of the word mildew as it applies to plant pathology and mildew in buildings and on clothing. I receive many phone calls with people that refer to mildew in their homes or offices. Most commonly they are actually referring to mold, not mildew, but the term mildew is used to describe what they are seeing and have been taught to say. Our minds have been tricked with advertisements and cleaning products saying “mold and mildew” so we think they are the same.

Molds that we will typically find as a result of water damage are confused as being mildew. These growths that we will find on drywall, paneling, wood, etc. take on many different colors to include: black, brown, green, yellow, orange, gray, white, blue, red etc. Mildews are typically only whitish or grayish when they grow, and as I have explained are typically found on plants, however we do see them occasionally in homes.

Scientifically there is a difference between mold and mildew. For the average homeowner, they probably don't need to worry so much of the scientific difference between the two. They need to understand what causes mold to grow and when found in an indoor environment, that it should be assessed and removed professionally.