

RECOVERY

Save Our Stuff

Clock is ticking to dry out and salvage flood-damaged possessions left in wake of Hurricane Harvey

By Diane Cowen



Andy Jacobsohn / Dallas Morning News / TNS

Joey Dill, from left, Josh Dill and John Hallmark move a piano from a home in Kingwood to an area where it can dry out.



Robert Gauthier / Los Angeles Times / TNS

Special care should be taken when attempting to salvage books, photographs and artwork.



Robert Gauthier / Los Angeles Times / TNS

There is a chance that flood-damaged wood furniture can be salvaged if it given time to dry out properly.

Safety tips

In post-storm cleanup, this cannot be said enough: Photograph everything. Not only are you taking pictures to show what you have, but you are also showing damage that's been incurred.

If water has been in your home, you should have turned off the power. Before turning it back on or using electrical appliances, consult an electrician for safety. Don't start a fire in your house by using a wet electrical outlet.

Many people keep mold at bay with bleach water. Pine recommends a mixture of 7 parts alcohol with 1 part water applied from a spray bottle. You can use isopropyl alcohol or ethanol-based liquids, or even denatured alcohol that you'd find in a paint store. Spray it on clean furniture, flooring and other objects; no need to rub it in.

Floodwaters likely have hydrocarbon contamination and may have other toxins from sewage. Wear rubber gloves and keep your hands away from your eyes during cleanup.

As the inside of your home dries, toxins from the water could leave an unhealthy film on everything in your home. A face mask can protect you from anything that gets airborne.

If your home has taken on even a small amount of water in the past week's weather events, you're likely wondering if your possessions are salvageable.

Don't panic, says Steve Pine, senior decorative arts conservator at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, and president of the Texas Cultural Emergency Response Alliance. There's more you can do — and save — than you might think.

The first step is to get your belongings to safety and get them clean. That will keep mold at bay and will go a long way toward saving your flooring, furniture, textiles and other things.

While many people recommend using bleach water for cleanup and mold prevention, Pine and his colleagues — experts at preserving museum-quality valuables — prefer a mixture of 7 parts alcohol and 1 part water.

And whatever you're trying to save, do it with caution. Wear rubber gloves and a particle mask. You can assume that floodwaters are more than water; they likely have gas/oil contamination and may even have mixed with sewage.

In your own triage, determine what is most important to you. Start there and take steps to save lesser things for later. You might be surprised at how much you can do. Beyond that, call in professionals.

Here's Pine's advice:

Wood floors

When wood takes on water it swells, prompting a floor to cup, buckle or pitch. Once you've gotten water out of the room, clean off dirt and silt and then start the process of drying. Open windows and doors, if you can, and set fans in a room to accelerate drying.

Wood floors in a pier-and-beam home have a better chance of being saved because air can flow above and below, compared to a home that sits on a concrete slab.

The good news is that the weather forecast for the next week works in your favor. Temperatures should stay in the 80s for most of the week, allowing you to turn off your air conditioner and open up your home if you have water issues to address.

You may need to replace some boards, and you almost certainly will have to refinish your floor's surface.

To know if your flooring is dry enough to call in a wood flooring expert, use the old-fashioned method: touch it. You'll be able to tell if it's wet or still cool to the touch.

Hardwoods have a decent shot at surviving flooding, Pine said. Composite flooring, though, is made of wood, filler and glue and will become pulpy. It likely is ruined.

The bottom line is, the better your flooring to start with, the more likely it can be salvaged.

Antiques and wood furniture

Like with flooring, the most important thing for wood furniture is to get it to safety — that means someplace that's dry. Remove drawers from case pieces and take any wet clothing or textiles out of them.

If drawers or cabinet doors have metal pulls and knobs, remove those, dry them and put them in resealable bags so they don't get lost. If left on wet wood, they can corrode and leave stains.

If drawers are so swollen that they don't pull out easily, try removing panels on the back to take wet things out of them. Otherwise, you might damage drawers trying to force them out.

Upholstered furniture

"Upholstered furniture is a sponge," Pine said. "A decorative sponge, but it's a sponge, and water cannot evaporate quickly enough to prevent mold."

This is the trickiest part of salvaging what's in your home. If you have something with valuable or historic fabric, you can take measures to have it removed and restored, but for most furniture, upholstered pieces need to be taken apart and redone.

Fabric and cushions will be ruined. Any metal springs or supports in sofas or chairs are likely coated, so they shouldn't corrode. Still, you'll have to take these pieces down to the frame and clean them. Wood finishes will need to be redone.

Once you've stripped a piece down, put it in a room with fans and let it dry. The most important thing you can do for this furniture — if you plan to have it reupholstered — is to keep it from getting moldy.

"Do what you can with the resources you have at hand," Pine said. "Put it in a room with fans or take it outside. I'm used to thinking in terms of things at the museum, but the sun is better than nothing in terms of stabilizing things and starting the drying process."

Photographs

Wet photos can be saved. Any wet photos that are stuck together can be dunked in a bucket of clean water and swished around until they separate. The same can be done for photos in frames that have stuck to glass.

Once they're separated, lay them flat and let them dry out. If you have bigger worries at the moment than saving photos, put the wet photos — yes, even ones stuck together — in a resealable bag and put them in your freezer to deal with later.

If your photos are damaged, the image and memory can be preserved by photo restoration experts.

Textiles

This category can be tricky. Cotton is sturdy, wool will shrink. Silks can be damaged and turn brittle if exposed to sunlight. Whatever you've got, look at the label for handling each item, whether clothing, table linens or anything else. If it's dry clean only, let it dry and take it to a dry cleaner; let them see if they can save it, Pine recommends.

For example, if you have older, more fragile table linens, remove them from a cabinet or drawer and, if you can't carry them to safety as they are, then put them in a plastic trash bag and carry them in the bag. You don't want to damage things as you're dragging or carrying things out of a home.

Fill a clean bathtub with cool water and rinse dirt and other things from textiles before laying them flat to dry. You can also use a fine spray from a garden hose to clean fabrics.

Pine noted the many nuances to different types of fabric, and said that they all should be handle with care. Rinse out mud and debris and then gently press water out of them; don't wring or twist fabrics to get them to dry more quickly.

Framed art

Immediately remove art from its frame unless the image is stuck to the glass. If it's wet, rinse off mud or dirt with a sponge and distilled water. Anything stuck to glass should be kept in the frame and dried glass-side down.

If paint on any art is cracking, flaking or damaged, don't try to clean it. Instead, consult a professional conservator.

Let pieces air dry without exposing them to heat or sunlight.

Books and documents

If books have become dirty and rinsing is necessary, do so with the books closed. Insert wax paper between leather, cloth or paper materials that are tacky or sticky.

To dry out books, pack them spine side down in a single layer in sturdy containers. (Stack, but do not crush the books.) Then place the container in a freezer with a frost-free setting on the lowest possible temperature. This drying process can take weeks or months. diane.cowen@chron.com
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