

The sniff test

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JLC Inspections owner Jack Clausen and Trace prepare to go to work.



WHERE'S MY TREAT? Trace looks up at his boss, Jack Clausen, expecting a reward after finding mold in the kitchen of a home that's for sale, as real estate agents watch.

Trace's big, brown eyes seemed to get even bigger and his nose wiggled more than usual. Although he was excited, he immediately lay down in the hallway of the vacant Mission Viejo house.

"Show me," said his partner, Jack Clausen.

Trace leaned from his sitting position, his large nose pointing directly at a blank area of drywall.

"Good boy," Clausen said, dropping a small cookie into Trace's open mouth.

Trace, as you may have guessed, is a dog. But he's not just any dog; he's a certified mold-detecting dog.

In recent years, toxic mold found in homes and commercial structures has been identified as a health concern, associated with headaches, breathing problems, fatigue and joint pain. Unchecked, mold and water damage can cause structural problems in homes.

While dogs have been used for years by the military and law-enforcement agencies to detect bombs and illicit drugs, it's only recently that they've been used to find mold in homes and commercial structures.

Trace is one of two mold-detection dogs used by Clausen, owner of JLC Home Inspections of Trabuco Canyon. Hershey is a chocolate Lab. He's still working. He was rescued from a Florida organization. Trace, a black Labrador retriever, came from Southern California Labrador Retriever Rescue.

Florida is also where Hershey and Trace were trained. And it wasn't just a matter of sit and stay. Each dog going through Bill Whitstine's Florida Canine Academy receives more than 1,000 hours of training even before its prospective

handler arrives at the academy. Whitstine is widely recognized for training dogs to hunt for bombs and drugs, to detect arson and to find dead bodies in wreckage. Whitstine's dogs were used for such detection after the 9/11 terrorist attacks in New York City and Washington, D.C.

The dogs receive training in odor identification, search patterns, scent discrimination, even how to ride in a vehicle, since they do a lot of traveling from house to house, building to building.

Human partners get training in dog handling, how to coach search patterns the dog should follow and how to work in different types of buildings. There is also instruction in proper care for the dog, canine first aid and canine CPR, said Clausen. He also holds a California general-contractor's license and is a graduate of the American Home Inspectors Training Institution. AHIT is one of two schools licensed by the state of California as an accredited home-inspection training institution.

The dogs are trained to detect odors that mold produces.

In a home or commercial structure mold can be found in drywall, carpeting, furniture or insulation. Mold often is not visible because it is hidden behind walls, floors and ceilings. That's where the advantage comes in using mold-detection dogs.

Once the dog detects such an odor, he is trained to sit or lie down. The handler then says: "Show me," and the dog points his nose at the spot where he has detected the odor. He is then rewarded with a treat.

The material is then sampled by the inspector and a laboratory test done.



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How much will it cost to have your home inspected for mold? Will insurance pay for it?

The number of insurance companies that cover mold inspection and remediation has dwindled to a few in the past 10 years. Huge costs to these companies resulted from increased awareness nationwide of the mold problems in homes. Now you'd be lucky to find a company that does cover mold problems.

What's a mold inspection cost? The price varies from company to company, and according to such factors as the size of the structure to be inspected, the difficulty in inspecting the roof and foundation (if it's a crawlspace underneath), and the extent of the inspection.

Clausen says his basic inspections for homes up to 2,000 square feet start at \$275. Add in some difficulties, though, and that price can rise. This is true for inspections that do and don't use dogs.

Is the use of mold-detecting dogs worthwhile or just a gimmick?

Mike Buettner, who owns Respircare Analytical of Glendale, Ariz., a widely recognized indoor air-quality consultant who serves on several independent association boards, has kept an open mind about the use of dogs to inspect for mold.

"There are some people who may scoff at the use of dogs in these investigations, but I look at the dogs as a tool. I'm not a dog lover," Buettner said, "but I can respect their use."

Do the dogs seem to enjoy all this? Maybe it was just the cookie he got as a reward, maybe it was because he had "won" the game, maybe it was just being with his buddy Clausen, but something seemed to put a smile on Trace's face as he left the Mission Viejo house.

RESOURCES

The Environmental Protection Agency offers comprehensive advice for homeowners in dealing with mold. Go online to www.epa.gov/iaq/molds/moldguide.html (<http://www.epa.gov/iaq/molds/moldguide.html>). Guides are available in English and Spanish.

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