

RECOMMENDED HOMEOWNER FOUNDATION MAINTENANCE PROGRAM FOR RESIDENTIAL PROJECTS IN THE HOUSTON AREA

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Introduction

Performance of residential structures depends not only on the proper design and construction, but also on the proper foundation maintenance program. Many residential foundations have experienced major foundation problems as a result of owner's neglect or alterations to the initial design, drainage, or landscaping. This has resulted in considerable financial loss to the homeowners, builders, and designers in the form of repairs and litigation.

A properly designed and constructed foundation may still experience distress from vegetation and expansive soil which will undergo volume change when correct drainage is not established or incorrectly controlled water source becomes available.

The purpose of this document is to present recommendations for maintenance of properly designed and constructed residential projects in Houston. It is recommended that the builder submit this document to his/her client at the time that the owner receives delivery of the house.

Typical Foundations

Foundations for support of residential structures in the Houston area consist of pier and beam type foundation, spread footing foundation, conventionally reinforced slab, or a post-tensioned slab. A soils exploration must be performed before a proper foundation system can be designed.

General Soil Conditions

Variabile subsoil conditions exist in the Houston Metro area. Highly expansive soils exist in the West University, Bellaire, Southwest Houston, Clear Lake, Friendswood, Missouri City, and First Colony areas.

Sandy soils with potential for severe perched water table problems as a result of poor drainage are present in the North and West Houston, including portions of Piney Point, Hedwig Village, The Woodlands, Kingwood, Atascocita, Cypresswood, Fairfield, etc.

A perched water table condition can occur in an area consisting of surficial silty sands or clayey sands underlain by impermeable clays. During the wet (rainy) season, water can pond on the clays (due to poor drainage) and create a perched water table condition. The sands become extremely soft, wet, and lose their load carrying capacity.

Drainage

The initial builder/developer site grading (positive drainage) should be maintained during the useful life of the residence. In general, a civil engineer develops a drainage plan for the whole subdivision. Drainage sewers or other discharge channels are designed to accommodate the water runoff. These paths should be kept clear of debris such as leaves, gravel, and trash.

In the areas where expansive soils are present, positive drainage should be provided away from the foundations. Changes in moisture content of expansive soils are the cause of both swelling and shrinking. Positive drainage should also be maintained in the areas where sandy soils are present.

Positive drainage is extremely important in minimizing soil-related foundation problems.

The homeowners berm the flowerbed areas, creating a dam between the berm and the foundation, preventing the surface water from draining away from the structure. This condition may be visually appealing, but can cause significant foundation damage as a result of negative drainage.

The most commonly used technique for grading is a positive drainage away from the structure to promote rapid runoff and to avoid collecting ponded water near the structure which could migrate down the soil/foundation interface. This slope should be about 3 to 5 percent within 10-feet of the foundation.

Should the owner change the drainage pattern, he should develop positive drainage by backfilling near the grade beams with select fill compacted to 90 percent of the maximum dry density as determined by ASTM D 698-91 (standard proctor).

This level of compaction is required to minimize subgrade settlements near the foundations and the subsequent ponding of the surface water. The select fill soils should consist of silty clays and sandy clays with liquid limits less than 40 and plasticity index (PI) between 10 and 20. Bank sand or top soils are not a select fill. The use of Bank sand or top soils to improve drainage away from a house is discouraged; because, sands are very permeable. In the event that sands are used to improve drainage away from the structure, one should make sure the clay soils below the sands have a positive slope (3 - 5 Percent) away from the structure, since the clay soils control the drainage away from the house.

The author has seen many projects with an apparent positive drainage; however, since the drainage was established with sands on top of the expansive soils the drainage was not effective.

Depressions or water catch basin areas should be filled with compacted soil (sandy clays or silty clays not bank sand) to have a positive slope from the structure, or drains should be provided to promote runoff from the water catch basin areas. Six to twelve inches of compacted, impervious, non-swelling soil placed on the site prior to construction of the foundation can improve the necessary grade and contribute additional uniform surcharge pressure to reduce uneven swelling of underlying expansive soil.

Pets (dogs, etc.) sometimes excavate next to the exterior grade beams and created depressions and low spots in order to stay cool during the hot season. This condition will result in ponding of the surface water in the excavations next to the foundation and subsequent foundation movements. These movements can be in the form of uplift in the area with expansive soils and settlement in the areas with sandy soils. It is recommended as a part of the foundation maintenance program, the owner backfills all excavations created by pets next to the foundation with compacted clay fill.

Grading and drainage should be provided for structures constructed on slopes, particularly for slopes greater than 9 percent, to rapidly drain off water from the cut areas and to avoid ponding of water in cuts or on the uphill side of the structure. This drainage will also minimize seepage through backfills into adjacent basement walls.

Subsurface drains may be used to control a rising water table, groundwater and underground streams, and surface water penetrating through pervious or fissured and highly permeable soil. Drains can help control the water table in the expansive soils.

Furthermore, since drains cannot stop the migration of moisture through expansive soil beneath foundations, they will not prevent long-term swelling. Moisture barriers can be placed near the foundations to minimize moisture migration under the foundations. The moisture barriers should be at least five-feet deep in order to be effective.

Area drains can be used around the house to minimize ponding of the surface water next to the foundations. The area drains should be checked periodically to assure that they are not clogged.

The drains should be provided with outlets or sumps to collect water and pumps to expel water if gravity drainage away from the foundation is not feasible. Sumps should be located well away from the structure. Drainage should be adequate to prevent any water from remaining in the drain (i.e., a slope of at least 1/8 inch per foot of drain or 1 percent should be provided).

Positive drainage should be established underneath structural slabs with crawl space. This area should also be properly vented. Absence of positive drainage may result in surface water ponding and moisture migration through the slab. This may result in wood floor warping and tile unsticking.

It is recommended that at least six-inches of clearing be developed between the grade and the wall siding. This will minimize surface water entry between the foundation and the wall material, in turn minimizing wood decay.

Poor drainage at residential projects in North and West Houston can result in saturation of the surficial sands and development of a perched water table. The sands, once saturated, can lose their load carrying capacity. This can result in foundation settlements and bearing capacity failures. Foundations in these areas should be designed assuming saturated subsoil conditions.

In general, roof drainage systems, such as gutters or rain dispenser devices, are recommended all around the roof line when gutters and downspouts should be unobstructed by leaves and tree limbs. In the area where expansive soils are present, the gutters should be connected to flexible pipe extensions so that the roof water is drained at least 10-feet away from the foundations. Preferably the pipes should direct the water to the storm sewers. In the areas where sandy soils are present, the gutters should drain the roof water at least five-feet away from the foundations.

If a roof drainage system is not installed, rain-water will drip over the eaves and fall next to the foundations resulting in subgrade soil erosion, and creating depression in the soil mass, which may allow the water to seep directly under the foundation and floor slabs.

The home owner must pay special attention to leaky pools and plumbing. In the event that the water bill goes up suddenly without any apparent reason, the owner should check for a plumbing leak.

The introduction of water to expansive soils can cause significant subsoil movements. The introduction of water to sandy soils can result in reduction in soil bearing capacity and subsequent settlement. The home owner should also be aware of water coming from the air conditioning drain lines. The amount of water from the condensating air conditioning drain lines can be significant and can result in localized swelling in the soils, resulting in foundation distress.

Landscaping

General. A house with the proper foundation and drainage can still experience distress if the homeowner does not properly landscape and maintain his property. One of the most critical aspects of landscaping is the continual maintenance of properly designed slopes.

Installing flower beds or shrubs next to the foundation and keeping the area flooded will result in a net increase in soil expansion in the expansive soil areas. The expansion will occur at the foundation perimeter. It is recommended that initial landscaping be done on all sides, and that drainage away from the foundation should be provided and maintained. Partial landscaping on one side of the house may result in swelling on the landscaping side of the house and resulting differential swell of foundation and structural distress in a form of brick cracking, windows/door sticking, and slab cracking.

Landscaping in areas where sandy, non-expansive soils are present, with flowers and shrubs should not pose a major problem next to the foundations. This condition assumes that the foundations are designed for saturated soil conditions. Major foundation problems can occur if the planter areas are saturated as the foundations are not designed for saturated (perched water table) conditions. The problems can occur in a form of foundation settlement, brick cracking, etc.

Sprinkler Systems. Sprinkler systems can be used in the areas where expansive soils are present, provided the sprinkler system is placed all around the house to provide a uniform moisture condition throughout the year.

The use of a sprinkler system in parts of Houston where sandy soils are present should not pose any problems, provided the foundations are designed for saturated subsoil conditions with positive drainage away from the structure.

The excavations for the sprinkler system lines, in the areas where expansive soils are present, should be backfilled with impermeable clays. Bank sands or top soil should not be used as backfill. These soils should be properly compacted to minimize water flow into the excavation trench and seeping under the foundations, resulting in foundation and structural distress.

The sprinkler system must be checked for leakage at least once a month. Significant foundation movements can occur if the expansive soils under the foundations are exposed to a source of free water.

The homeowner should also be aware of damage that leaking plumbing or underground utilities can cause, if they are allowed to continue leaking and providing the expansive soils with the source of water.

Effect of Trees. The presence of trees near a residence is considered to be a potential contributing factor to the foundation distress. Our experience shows that the presence or removal of large trees in close proximity to residential structures can cause foundation distress. This problem is aggravated by cyclic wet and dry seasons in the area. Foundation damage of residential structures caused by the adjacent trees indicates that foundation movements of as much as 3- to 5-inches can be experienced in close proximity to residential foundations.

This condition will be more severe in the periods of extreme drought. Sometimes the root system of trees such as willow, elm, or oak can physically move foundations and walls and cause considerable structural damage. Root barriers can be installed near the exterior grade beams to a minimum depth of 60-inches, if trees are left in place in close proximity to foundations. It is recommended that trees not be planted closer than half the canopy diameter of the mature tree, typically 20-feet from foundations. Any trees in closer proximity should be thoroughly soaked at least twice a week during hot summer months, and once a week in periods of low rainfall. More frequent tree watering may be required.

Tree roots tend to desiccate the soils. In the event that the tree has been removed prior to house construction, during the useful life of the house, or if tree dies, subsoil swelling can occur for several years. Studies have shown that this process can last as much as 20 years in the area where highly expansive clays are present. In the areas where sandy soils are present this process does not occur.

In this case the foundation for the house should be designed for the anticipated maximum heave. Alternatively, the site should be left alone for several years so that the moisture regime in the desiccated area of the soils (where roots used to be) become equal/stabilized to the surrounding subsoil conditions.

Tree removal can be safe provided the tree is no older than any part of the house, since the subsequent heave can only return the foundation to its original level. In most cases there is no advantage to a staged reduction in the size of the tree and the tree should be completely removed at the earliest opportunity. The areas where expansive soils exist and where the tree is older than the house, or there are more recent extensions to the house, it is not advisable to remove the tree because the danger of inducing damaging heave; unless the foundation is designed for the total computed expected heave.

In the areas where non-expansive soils are present, no significant foundation distress will occur as a result of the tree removal.

In the areas where too much heave can occur with tree removal, some kind of pruning, such as crown thinning, crown reduction or pollarding should be considered. Pollarding, in which most of the branches are removed and the height of the main trunk is reduced, is often mistakenly specified, because most published advice links the height of the tree to the likelihood of damage. In fact the leaf area is the important factor. Crown thinning or crown reduction, in which some branches are removed or shortened, is therefore generally preferable to pollarding. The pruning should be done in such a way as to minimize the future growth of the tree, without leaving it vulnerable to disease (as pollarding often does) while maintaining its shape. This should be done only by a reputable tree surgeon or qualified contractor working under the instructions of an arbor culturist.

You may find there is opposition to the removal or reduction of an offending tree; for example, it may belong to a neighbor or the local authority, or have a Tree Preservation Order on it. In such cases there are other techniques that can be used from within your own property.

One option is root pruning, which is usually performed by excavating a trench between the tree and the damaged property deep enough to cut most of the roots. The trench should not be so close to the tree that it jeopardizes its stability. In time, the tree will grow new roots to replace those that are cut; however, in the short term there will be some recovery as the degree of desiccation in the soil under the foundations reduces.

Where the damage has only appeared in a period of dry weather, a return to normal weather pattern may prevent further damage occurring. Permission from the local authority is required before pruning the roots of a tree with preservation order on it.

Root barriers are a variant of root pruning. However, instead of simply filling the trench with soil after cutting the roots, the trench is either filled with concrete or lined with an impermeable layer to form a "permanent" barrier to the roots. Whether the barrier will be truly permanent is questionable, because the roots may be able to grow round or under the trench. However, the barrier should at least increase the time it takes for the roots to grow back.

Foundations/Flat Works

Every homeowner should conduct a yearly observation of foundations and flat works and perform any maintenance necessary to improve drainage and minimize infiltrations of water from rain and lawn watering. This is important especially during the first six years of a newly built home because this is usually the time of the most severe adjustment between the new construction and its environment. We recommend that all of the separations in the flat work and paving joints be immediately backfilled with joint sealer to minimize surface water intrusion and subsequent shrink/swell.

Some cracking may occur in the foundations. For example, most concrete slabs can develop hairline cracks. This does not mean that the foundation has failed. All cracks should be cleaned up of debris as soon as possible. The cracks should be backfilled with high-strength epoxy glue or similar materials. If a foundation experiences significant separations, movements, cracking, the owner must contact the builder and the engineer to find out the reason(s) for the foundation distress and develop remedial measures to minimize foundation