

Rental Watch

Dear AOA,

I am planning to install new ceramic tile into my apartment unit's kitchen and bathrooms. The property has a raised foundation. What can I do to prevent cracks along the grout lines? R.T.

[Dear R.T: For answers to this question and the ones that follow, we turned to licensed contractor and maintenance specialist Jerry L'Ecuyre.]

Dear R.T.,

Cracks along the grout lines are always a problem in a raised foundation building. If you have bounce in your floors, first thing will be to install bracing under the floor to reinforce the foundation. Either bolting or nailing additional 2 x 6 boards to the existing floor joists or installing a beam or girder across the floor joists and adding posts for support can accomplish this. Now that your floors are firm, make sure the sub floor is securely attached to floor joists. The next steps are very important. Measure, cut and test install sheets of Hardie Back ceramic tile underlay cement boards over the sub floor. Remove the cement boards keeping them close by. Now is the most important step: using Thin Set cement, trowel cement onto the sub floor using a one half-inch notch trowel. Lay your first Hardie Back board into place and using cement board screws attach the board to the sub floor. The screws should be about six inches apart along the edge and eight inches apart in the middle of the board. Now trowel more Thin Set cement and continue installing the boards. Spread out any thin set cement that oozes out between the seams.

You have now formed a strong base for your tile work. Using the Thin Set cement between the sub floor and the cement boards will fuse all the sub floor materials together and lessen the likelihood of grout cracking due to floor movement.

Dear AOA,

I have a graffiti problem along one wall of my property. I am tired of repainting and cleaning this area. Do you have any solutions or alternatives to help me fight this constant maintenance issue? G.G.

Dear G.G.,

We understand this is a frustrating and expensive problem. We have found it is best to remove the "canvas" these graffiti artists like to use. What we mean is to make your fence less attractive to the graffiti vandals. If you have room, planting large bushes along the fence will make it hard to reach. But if you do not have room for bushes, use creeping vines to cover the face of the fence. Also, using metal or wood trellises will help train the vine to grow where you want it. We like to use a welded wire mesh with 6-inch squares as a trellis. (This wire mesh is typically used for concrete slab reinforcement and comes in four by eight foot sections.) If you paint the mesh the same color as the fence, it practically disappears.

Dear AOA:

How often should I service my building's water heater? I have a 100-gallon water heater that supplies four units. B.L.

Dear B.L.:

Each city or county has differing levels of hard water. The harder your water, the more often you will need to service your water heater. Your city or water provider should be able to tell you the hardness in your area or check at your local hardware store or home center for a hard water kit. The kit will allow you to test your own water.

Most 100-gallon water heaters have an access port for cleaning out the calcium deposits. The tank should be cleaned out at minimum ever 12 months. If you have very hard water, clean it out every six to nine months. Also check the anode rod inside the tank. If you cannot see or locate the rod from the access port, you need a new one. The anode rod should hang to within a few inches of the bottom. If the rod is visible but badly corroded, replace it. The anode rod is a

sacrificial zinc rod designed to draw corrosion away from the tank itself. A replacement anode rod can be found at a plumbing supply store. The anode rod can be checked by removing it from the top of the tank and then determining its condition. Typically the average anode rod should last five years. While you are servicing the tank, check the burner assemblies for debris and the gas orifice for spider webs or dust bunnies.

If your tank does not have an access port, regardless of heater size, flush out the tank every six months, if you have hard water, flush it every three months. The easiest way to flush the tank is to attach a garden hose onto the drain valve at the bottom of the tank. (Be careful to avoid scalding anybody or landscape at the hose end.) Using water pressure, open the drain valve full blast and allow at least two or three gallons of water to rush out of the tank. If this is done regularly, it should keep the calcium down to a minimum.

Remember that every property and situation is different so when making building and/or equipment changes, make sure you know your local code compliance laws, uniform building codes and NFPA safety standards. Always consult with a licensed contractor, building inspector and/or related professional if you have a particular problem. If you are in need of a licensed, insured contractor or inspector, you might want to call Contractors Referral service toll free at 1-866-769-7523.

Jerry L'Ecuyre is the owner of JLE Property Management & Buffalo Maintenance, and is a licensed contractor and real estate broker. Jerry has been involved with apartments as a professional since 1988. He can be reached at (714) 778-0480 or at his website www.jle.com.