

Man's best friend, mold's worst enemy



Dogs use nose power to help specialists pinpoint location of mold

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A Miami couple who started a mold detection company with the purchase of a \$12,500 [MoldDog](#) was surprised by how quickly their "working dog" went to work. The dog unexpectedly detected mold in the couple's own bathroom within moments after they brought the dog home.



Bill Whitstine, a certified master dog trainer, wasn't surprised by his student dog's fast find, although the story amused him.

"They didn't buy the dog to assess their own house," said Whitstine, owner of the Florida Canine Academy, which trains dogs that detect bombs, drugs, money, weapons, termites and accelerants. The academy's MoldDog subsidiary trains the mold-detection dogs. Whitstine is a retired fire marshal who has more than 15 years' experience training dogs.

Mold-detecting dogs differ from other air-quality testing methods in that dogs can pinpoint the source of the mold while equipment can't. Hardware can confirm the presence of mold, but locating the exact source can require repeat testing and some demolition of the property, Whitstine said.

A mold-trained dog can put its nose "right to the spot where the mold is" and alert the handler to where the mold begins and ends, he said.

He claims a dog's ability to hone in immediately on the mold source, even if it's behind walls, under floors or above ceilings, potentially can save homeowners thousands of dollars and help them avoid unnecessary demolition.

"From cocaine to peanut butter, it all has an odor" and the dogs can be trained to detect it, he said.

Whitstine added mold-smart canines to his list of specially trained dog teams after news headlines began blasting the dangers of mold, insurers started asking for mold-detection dogs and insurance companies reported the high costs of mold damage and remediation--more than \$1 billion in 2001, according to the Insurance Information Network of California.

The company has 122 termite-detecting dogs in the field and other dogs that can detect water leaks as deep as 15 feet underground, he said.

A MoldDog can detect but not differentiate 18 types of mold common in the United States, said Whitstine. He has been training mold-detecting dogs for approximately five years, but began selling the dogs only seven months ago. He has sold 25 of the dogs to home inspectors, mold inspectors and remediators and others.

Bob Carter, owner of Tucker, Ga.-based [Elite Detection Dawgs](#), purchased Brandy, a chocolate Lab, two months ago and has inspected approximately 15 commercial and residential properties.

Carter uses a visual inspection, moisture readings, a building owner questionnaire and the dog to evaluate whether a building has mold in it. If Brandy doesn't "alert" to mold, Carter considers the building to be mold-free. Otherwise, further testing in a laboratory is done, he said.

Carter believes working with a dog returns fast and consumer-friendly results. He charges approximately \$500 for a basic inspection and won't cut into walls or floors unless further testing is required.

"We don't have X-ray vision to look through walls, but dogs have X-ray nose technologies," he said.

Not everyone is a fan of mold-detecting dogs.

A spokesperson from the Environmental Protection Agency said she hadn't heard of MoldDogs and refused to comment on the subject.

David Kichula, owner of Roosevelt, N.J.-based Air Consulting Services, questioned the expertise of a novice inspector/dog team.

Kichula said only an expert knowledgeable about building and plumbing systems and the dynamics of moisture can determine the presence of mold, even if it's inside walls, with a visual inspection of water damaged areas. He said it's "unrealistic" to expect a person with no industrial hygiene experience and a dog to replace an expert. At best, he said, a dog could be an effective "tool" as long as the tool was wielded by an expert.

"A dog could find mold, but couldn't tell you what to do about it," he said. "I have a dog and I leave it at home."

Proponents point to law enforcement's reliance on dogs to track people and detect bombs and drugs.

Dogs' "amazingly sensitive" noses can follow a biochemical trail of dead skin cells, sweat, odor molecules and gasses, and dogs can track scent through snow, air, mud, water and ash, according to MoldDog's Web site.

Whitstine wouldn't reveal exactly how he trains the dogs because the process



and the MoldDog are trademarked. But he did divulge that he adopts many of his dogs from the Humane Society of North Pinellas in Florida. He selects dogs that are between 10 months to three years old who appear to be friendly, energetic and intelligent.

Any dog breed is capable of being a trained MoldDog, but Whitstine said he likes mutts because they present "the best of both worlds" sans some of the health problems more common to pure breeds.

Whitstine said The Canine Academy was deluged with orders for approximately 50 bomb-sniffing dogs during the eight months after Sept. 11, 2001. Prior to that, the academy sold two bomb-sniffing dogs a year. The demand for bomb-sniffing dogs stalled MoldDog's plan to market and sell mold-detecting dogs, but that plan is now back on track, he said.

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