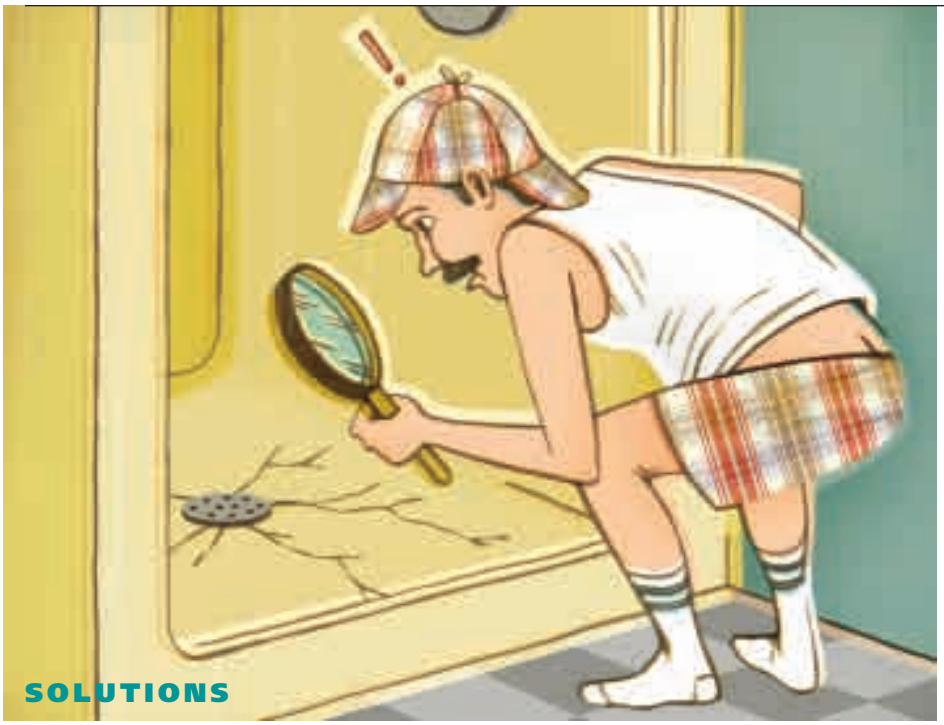

SOLUTIONS

The shower crack'd

When it comes to showers at the cottage, you get what you pay for. We learned this the hard way after installing an el cheapo one-piece polystyrene unit shortly after acquiring the miracle of hot water up north. Over winter, fine spiderweb cracks crazed our brand new mod con.

Some experts don't recommend polystyrene showers for unheated cottages because they are prone to cracking when the thermometer dips below zero. They are also less forgiving of a sloppy installation and aren't as durable as the more substantial acrylic or fibreglass units. Polystyrene shower units cost about $350; fibreglass or acrylic units start at $650. The higher price is worth it, because if an acrylic or fibreglass shower is properly installed and you take a few simple precautions, it shouldn't craze, even in subarctic conditions.

When you're building the frame for a shower insert, start with seasoned wood, which you're more likely to find at lumber suppliers that store wood indoors where it is dry. Green wood can shrink or twist, which can crack even the most expensive acrylic shower surround. Make sure the rough-in opening is built to the specs in the installation instructions. In particular, mind the gap between the studs and your unit: The unit should slide in easily, without butting up against the framing. The most important installation step to prevent cracking is reinforcing the base before you install the shower. First, ensure the subfloor is level, then apply two inches of concrete or mortar (again, check the instructions) to fill the gap between the subfloor and the base of the unit, particularly around the drain. This strengthens the bottom to prevent flexing and therefore, cracking. It also curtails any movement that could break the seal to the drain and cause a leak.

When you close up in fall, don't forget to pour propylene glycol antifreeze in the shower drain to prevent water in the trap from freezing. And if you do visit your cottage when the snow flies, don't step into the shower until it has warmed up, because cold plastic is brittle plastic, hence more vulnerable to damage.

If cracks do appear, they will probably start where the shower floor curves into the wall. An acrylic or fibreglass shower repair kit works well to seal any breach, but the fix won't be invisible. For a perfect job, call a specialist, for a minimum charge of about $150. If your unit does crack, don't ignore it, because it will get worse and eventually leak. You can always do what we did – a cheap-and-cheerful, if butt-ugly, temporary cover-up: Unholster the trusty caulking gun and fill in the cracks with silicone. Our shower may look like the local rink in desperate need of a Zamboni, but it doesn't seem to leak. At least for now. *—Kate Barker*

JOB JAR

DOCK SHOCKS

When rough water slams your floating dock around, snapping it taut against its anchor chains, both the hardware and the structure that secure the chains take a beating. *Ka-thunk!* A stretchy remedy to the problem is a shock absorber made from rubber tie-down straps you can pick up for less than $5 at hardware and automotive supply stores.

The fix is best done before you drop anchor, but can also be achieved with a mask and snorkel. Hook one of the strap's S-hooks onto the chain near the anchor, then, leaving some slack in the chain, attach the other end of the strap farther up the chain. The amount of slack in the chain should be roughly equal to the length of the strap when it is stretched to the max. When the strap is in place, use a hammer or pliers to squeeze the S-hooks closed. Now, when a wave or wake hits the dock, the tie-down will stretch out and absorb the shock before the anchor chain twangs tight. And, protected from UV rays, your new dock shocks can last for years. *—David Zimmer*

ILLUSTRATION: RHONDA MULDER. PHOTO: GARY DAVIDSON