

A tankless job

Owning a home comes with surprises lurking under the tomatoes and zucchini

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One of the real joys of homeownership is that you never really know what unanticipated expense is going to jump up and bite you when you least expect it -- stuff like repairing the roof, replacing the furnace or removing a tree.

But all of those are at least within the general realm of expectation. You may not have planned on shelling out the money at that particular time, but it doesn't entirely surprise you that something like that could happen.

Oily problem

Then there's the stuff that comes totally out of left field --such as removing an underground fuel storage tank.

Yes, I speak from personal experience. We've only recently discovered -- and paid to extract -- a 1,000-gallon fuel tank that has been lurking beneath our backyard during the nearly two decades we've owned our Oak Park home.

I wouldn't bore you with it except this also is the first I realized there are many more homes, possibly thousands, with their own tanks still gathering rust beneath residential properties in older communities such as Oak Park and along the North Shore, all of them dating back to the era when home heating oil was the norm.

When homes switched to natural gas, the heating oil tanks were abandoned. As the houses later switched hands, the tanks were eventually forgotten.

But they're still down there, gradually deteriorating, filling with water in many cases and threatening to become a real problem under the right circumstances, assuming some of the petroleum product was left behind, as is normally the case.

I probably wouldn't have realized I had a situation if we hadn't wanted to start parking a car alongside the garage in the spot where I have always kept a vegetable garden.

Digging in

There's always been this old capped steel pipe sticking up there. I just gardened around it. A long time ago, I remember showing it to my dad, who told me it was probably used to pump home heating oil to the house, likely from a truck that made its deliveries through the alley.

When we decided last month to turn the area into a parking space, my wife suggested cutting off the pipe because it stuck out of the ground so far it could have damaged the car. Remembering what my dad told me, I didn't think it wise to create any sparks inside the pipe. Instead, I tried digging around it to see if it would break off below ground level.

To my surprise, the pipe began to work itself loose as I dug until I was able to unscrew it. When it came free, some dirt fell back in the hole and made a plopping noise that let me know I had a bigger problem. I stuck a 5-foot tree branch into the hole, and it came out four-fifths covered with some kind of oily liquid. It had never occurred to me there was a fuel tank down there beneath my tomatoes and zucchini.

That's when I discovered we had three choices: ignore it and hope it doesn't cause a problem now or when we go to sell our house; pump it out and fill it in and hope we don't have an issue when we go to sell our house or have the whole thing removed and know it won't be a problem later.

We decided to get the work done.

Unlike commercial underground storage tanks, neither the state nor federal government have any regulations when it comes to dealing with residential heating oil tanks, so it's basically between you and your conscience, except you must disclose it when selling your home, which obviously can raise a red flag with prospective buyers.

Tell-tale pipe sparks questions

Often, the underground storage tanks become an issue after they are spotted by home inspectors, who notice the fill pipe like the one I removed or a vent pipe, which is usually closer to the house. Sometimes, there are tell-tale pipes in the basement, said Dan Teague of R.W. Collins Co. in Chicago, a leading tank removal company

Tom Osusky, whose Cicero Oil Co. specializes in removing residential tanks, said many people make the mistake of cutting off the fill pipe because it interferes with their lawnmower.

That can cause the tank to fill with rainwater and eventually overflow, causing the fuel product to migrate into the soil, often winding up in the sewer system or the foundation of the house. If it's the foundation of your neighbor's house, that's when it can get real expensive, Osusky said.

One more thing to worry about, but don't say I didn't warn you.