



The Georgia Homeowner Guide to Spotting Hidden Drainage Problems

A practical, source-backed checklist for Metro Atlanta homes

Created by Stephanie Beechum • May 2026

What this guide helps you do

Follow water from the roof to the yard, recognize warning signs without over-diagnosing them, complete a safe after-rain walk-through, and know when a drainage contractor, structural engineer, electrician, pest professional, or mold professional may be appropriate.

Inside this guide

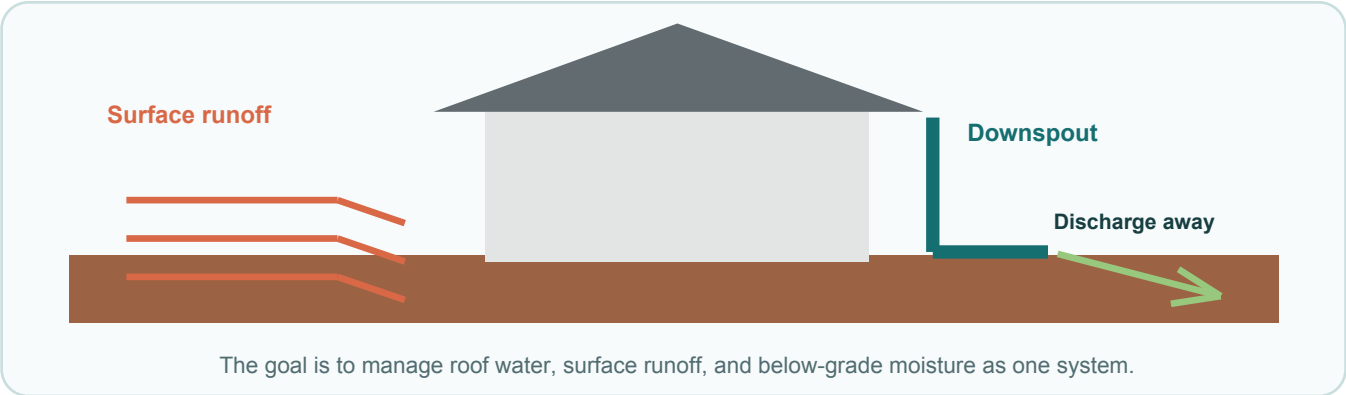
- Why clay-rich and compacted soils can slow infiltration
- Ten signs worth documenting after rain
- A safe 15-minute inspection checklist
- Low-risk maintenance—and what not to DIY
- How to prepare for a professional assessment



Use the QR code for a free FisherGuard inspection. This guide is educational and cannot identify the source or severity of a specific property problem.

Why Georgia drainage problems can be easy to miss

Drainage trouble often begins as a pattern rather than a dramatic event: recurring ponding, a downspout trench, damp masonry, a musty odor, or runoff that repeatedly moves toward the home. These clues can be caused by more than one source, so the goal is to document the pattern—not diagnose the property from one symptom.



What is supported	What it means for a homeowner
Many Georgia landscapes contain clay-rich soils that hold water and drain slowly.	Rain may infiltrate slowly, so surface grading and clear drainage paths matter.
Construction and repeated traffic can compact soil and reduce infiltration.	Newer yards can develop runoff or soggy areas even when the home itself is new.
Shrink–swell behavior depends on the clay minerals and the specific soil.	Do not assume every red-clay site is highly expansive or that a crack was caused by soil moisture.
Roof water, surface runoff, groundwater, plumbing, and indoor humidity can create similar symptoms.	A useful assessment traces the water source before recommending a repair.

Accuracy note

Clay-rich soil, poor grading, and foundation movement are related only in some cases. A visual checklist cannot determine soil type, structural capacity, or the cause of a crack.

Start outside: follow the water path

Look during a steady, non-severe rain or soon after it ends. Begin uphill and at the roofline, then work toward the home, side yards, low spots, and known drainage outlets.

Area	Healthy pattern	Pattern worth documenting
Gutters and roof edges	Water enters gutters without spilling behind or over the edge.	Overflow, leaking seams, fascia staining, or concentrated splash at the foundation.
Downspouts	Water reaches a visible, open, approved discharge path away from the structure.	Discharge at the wall, a muddy trench, a disconnected joint, or a buried line that backs up.
Ground next to the home	The finished surface generally falls away from the foundation.	A reverse slope, settlement trench, low bed, or water moving toward the wall.
Side yards and swales	Water has a stable path and continues draining after rain.	Recurring ponding, soggy strips, erosion, blocked swales, or runoff crossing the property unexpectedly.
Drains and outlets	Grates, catch basins, pop-up emitters, and outlets are visible and clear.	Debris, sediment, roots, standing water, damaged grates, or no visible discharge during rain.

Grading benchmark—not a DIY instruction

A widely used residential-code benchmark is about 6 inches of fall within the first 10 feet away from a foundation, with alternatives such as swales or drains where site constraints prevent that slope. Local codes, lot lines, retaining walls, utilities, septic systems, easements, and neighboring properties can change the appropriate solution.

10 warning signs worth documenting

A warning sign is evidence to investigate—not proof of a particular failure. Note when it occurs, where it occurs, and whether it changes after rain.

Warning sign	What it can indicate	What to record
1. Recurring ponding	Water repeatedly remains near the home, in side yards, or over a drain after rain.	Photograph the edge and depth; note how long it lasts.
2. Downspout erosion	A muddy trench, washed mulch, or splash marks form where roof water lands.	Document the outlet and whether it connects to a buried line.
3. Gutter overflow	Water spills over an edge, behind a gutter, or from a seam.	Check only from the ground; avoid ladder work in wet weather.
4. New runoff channels	Mulch, pine straw, soil, or gravel repeatedly washes into the same path.	Photograph the route from uphill to downhill.
5. Musty odor or damp materials	A crawlspace or basement smells musty, or insulation, wood, or stored items feel damp.	Possible sources include rain, humidity, plumbing, or HVAC—not drainage alone.
6. Efflorescence	A white powder or tide mark appears on masonry.	It indicates soluble salts left as moisture evaporated; locate the moisture source.
7. Dark, peeling, or weeping wall areas	Concrete or masonry appears wet, paint blisters, or water beads during rain.	Record timing and the exterior conditions on the opposite side.
8. Structural movement signs	A crack is new or widening, or a wall bows, shifts, or develops stair-step/horizontal cracking.	Request qualified evaluation; rapid change or displacement deserves prompt attention.
9. Sudden door/window changes	A door or window begins sticking along with visible cracking or floor/wall movement.	Humidity can also change fit, so look for a repeating pattern.
10. Dampness plus pests	Roaches, termites, or other pests appear where materials are persistently damp.	Moisture control and a separate pest inspection may both be needed.

Your safe 15-minute after-rain check

Safety first

Wait until lightning and severe weather have passed. Stay off steep or slippery slopes. Do not enter floodwater, a wet electrical area, or a tight crawlspace. Never operate a switch, tool, or pump while standing in water; call an electrician when electrical equipment is wet or near standing water.

Step	Action	Record
1	From a safe, dry location, look from the street or driveway back toward the home.	Does the lot carry water toward or away from the structure?
2	Walk the roof perimeter from the ground and observe gutters and downspouts.	Overflow, leaks, disconnected joints, erosion, buried-line backup.
3	Walk both side yards and known swales or drains.	Ponding, soggy strips, sediment, blocked outlets, runoff direction.
4	Check beds, patios, steps, and the first several feet beside the foundation.	Reverse slope, low spots, splash marks, washed mulch, settling.
5	From safely accessible interior areas, check basement/crawlspace walls, floors, and exposed materials.	Odor, dampness, stains, efflorescence, peeling paint, active water.
6	Take wide and close photos and mark the date, rain timing, and location.	Use the same photo positions after the next storm to compare.

A useful photo sequence

Take one wide photo showing the whole area, one close photo showing the symptom, and one photo showing where the water should go next. A short video during rain can reveal flow direction better than a dry-weather photo.

Low-risk maintenance—and what not to DIY

Usually low-risk when safely accessible	Pause and get qualified help
• Clear leaves and surface debris from visible grates, catch basins, and outlets.	• Standing water is near electrical equipment, outlets, wiring, or the service panel.
• Keep gutters clear from the ground or hire a qualified gutter professional if ladder work is required.	• A wall bows, shifts, or develops new/widening horizontal or stair-step cracks.
• Reconnect a simple above-ground downspout extension if it is designed to discharge safely on the property.	• You would need to excavate, alter a retaining wall, disturb utilities, or change the lot's drainage pattern.
• Remove leaves or loose mulch that is visibly blocking an existing surface-flow path without regrading it.	• Runoff would be redirected to a neighbor, public sidewalk/road, septic area, eroding slope, or unapproved drain.
• Photograph and label recurring wet areas after comparable storms.	• Water enters the living space, crawlspace, or basement repeatedly, or mold-like growth is visible.

Avoid the “one product fixes everything” trap

A French drain, catch basin, swale, sump pump, waterproof coating, crack repair, or downspout line solves only the water pathway it was designed for. A lasting plan starts with the source, volume, route, outlet, maintenance needs, and site constraints.

Before scheduling an assessment, collect:

- Three to five photos or a short rain video
- The rooms or exterior areas affected
- When the problem began and whether it is changing
- Any known buried drains, sump pumps, repairs, additions, or grading work
- The approximate time water remains after rain

When to schedule a professional assessment

A drainage or waterproofing assessment is reasonable when:

- water repeatedly moves toward or remains near the home;
- a basement or crawlspace has recurring water, damp materials, or returning efflorescence;
- gutters, downspouts, surface drains, and grading do not explain the whole pattern;
- erosion, settlement trenches, or blocked outlets continue to return;
- a sump pump cycles frequently or a buried line backs up;
- you are planning excavation, regrading, a retaining wall, or a new drainage system.

A useful property assessment should:

1	Listen	Document the symptoms, storm timing, and the homeowner’s priorities.
2	Trace	Follow roof water, grade, low spots, drains, outlets, and interior moisture clues.
3	Separate	Distinguish likely rain/runoff pathways from plumbing, humidity, irrigation, or structural concerns.
4	Explain	Describe the proposed water path, discharge point, maintenance, limitations, and alternatives.
5	Refer	Recommend an engineer, electrician, pest professional, mold professional, plumber, or other specialist when the issue falls outside drainage work.

Get urgent help when

Water is in contact with electrical equipment; floodwater may be contaminated; a wall is visibly bowing or displaced; a crack or settlement change is rapid; or there is an immediate safety concern. Use the appropriate emergency service or licensed specialist.

Scope: This guide is educational. It is not a structural, geotechnical, electrical, mold, pest, plumbing, code, or real-estate inspection and does not replace a site-specific evaluation.

Sources and accuracy notes

The guide uses primary public sources and deliberately avoids diagnosing a property from a symptom. Sources were reviewed July 23, 2026.

1. University of Georgia Cooperative Extension — clay soil and drainage. Explains that heavy clay soils common in parts of Georgia hold water and can drain slowly.
<https://site.extension.uga.edu/lincoln/the-goldilocks-dilemma-watering-your-landscape/>
2. USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service — soil shrink–swell potential. Explains that shrink–swell potential depends on the kind and amount of clay; not all clay behaves the same.
<https://directives.nrcs.usda.gov/sites/default/files2/1719846855/Part%20618%20Subpart%20A%20%E2%80%93%20General%20Information.pdf>
3. U.S. Environmental Protection Agency — moisture control. Recommends managing water outside foundations, sloping grade away, and directing downspouts at least a few feet away.
<https://www.epa.gov/indoor-air-quality-iaq/addressing-indoor-environmental-concerns-during-remodeling>
4. International Code Council — 2021 IRC R401.3. Provides the widely used 6-inches-in-10-feet drainage benchmark and alternatives where barriers prevent it.
<https://codes.iccsafe.org/s/IRC2021P3/chapter-4-foundations/IRC2021P3-Pt03-Ch04-SecR401.3>
5. U.S. Department of Energy Building Science Education — final grading. Explains grading, settling, swales, and drains as foundation water-management measures.
<https://bsesc.energy.gov/energy-basics/site-excavated-final-grade-sloped-away-home>
6. U.S. Environmental Protection Agency — compacted landscapes and runoff. Explains that compacted urban and suburban landscapes increase runoff.
<https://www.epa.gov/soakuptherain/soak-rain-whats-problem>
7. National Park Service — efflorescence and masonry moisture. Describes efflorescence as salts deposited where moisture migrates and evaporates from masonry.
<https://www.nps.gov/orgs/1739/upload/preservation-brief-39-controlling-moisture.pdf>
8. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention — flooded-home safety. Warns against operating switches, tools, or appliances while standing in water.
<https://www.cdc.gov/floods/safety/reentering-your-flooded-home-safety.html>

Local requirements control

Building codes, stormwater rules, easements, discharge restrictions, and permit requirements vary by location and project. Verify current requirements with the applicable local authority before changing grading or installing drainage.



Need a second opinion on how water moves across your property?

FisherGuard Water Protection provides free property inspections for yard drainage, waterproofing and foundation repair, and irrigation concerns across Metro Atlanta and surrounding communities.

Yard drainage solutions	Waterproofing & foundation repair	Irrigation systems
French drains, catch basins, channel drains, downspout drainage, swales, and site-specific water routing.	Site-specific moisture evaluation, waterproofing options, and referral when structural expertise is needed.	Installation, repair, troubleshooting, seasonal maintenance, and water-distribution improvements.



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