



By Lisa Wagner

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The idea of a plush, shaggy floor is a comfortable thought.

At least until it gets dirty.

Those of us who remember shag carpeting installed in homes in the 1970s also can remember why it quickly fell out of favor. Besides seeming to swallow small children in those especially long strands, it also was impossible to keep the stuff clean.

Now we have shag rugs of all shapes, sizes and materials – a great decorative idea but a horrible household reality.

Here are some of the cleaning challenges of shag rugs and how to handle them.

Chunky wool shags

Most rug cleaners are familiar with Flokati rugs. These are woven rugs from Greece that come in mostly off-white, natural tones and look like big sheepdogs on the floor. These shaggy, wool rugs are woven, so you clearly see the wool strands visible on the back.

There are also woven shag rugs from Morocco, which tend to have geometric designs instead of the solid color creations of the Greeks.

Today, however, we also have a huge variety of wool shag rugs ranging from dyed to undyed, from spun to felted and from thin strands to big noodle shapes. Many of the custom wool creations are strands tufted

into a cotton canvas foundation, often utilizing latex to hold them together.

Some of the challenges with wool shag rugs are:

Shedding and pilling. Wool yarn is spun from short-plied staple fibers, so when they are shag length, they tend to pull apart. Rugs made of the looser, chunkier wool often shed for years. On tighter-spun fibers, you also see pilling not unlike what you see on the elbows of wool sweaters after use. A wash can sometimes lessen this rug wool shedding, but in many cases this is a characteristic the owner has to live with.

Tough to vacuum. Standard vacuum cleaners are not going to work on these rugs. A horse hair brush can be used to groom and pick up surface matter and a crevice tool can be used to try to grab the gunk that gets embedded into the foundation of these rugs. Smaller rugs can be taken outside to shake free loose particulate matter, and large rugs can be hung and a



Flokati yellowed and shrunk from washing machine cleaning.

leaf blower used to try to beat and blow out the dirt and grit. In rug facilities, tumblers and compressed air tools can help remove soil as well as fluff up the fibers.

Tough to wash and decontaminate. These rugs become extremely heavy when wet, and agitation is a challenge because of the tendency to lose fibers and for the wool rows to not easily open up to release soil from the base. Crevice tools and pressure rinsing wands help you reach

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the foundation of these rugs in between these rows. Rugs with urine contamination often need extended soaking to try to remove contaminants. Smaller, woven Flokati rugs can be washed in a commercial washer, but you must watch the alkalinity and temperature because these rugs can yellow and shrink if improperly laundered.

Prone to moths. Owners of these wool shag rugs tend to wait too long to clean them, and the rug foundations are rarely reached by a vacuum. This makes this wool very susceptible to moths and carpet beetles. Bugs like dark, undisturbed places with a food source, so deep at the base of these fibers is a perfect home for them. Always grin open fibers to inspect for insect activity.

Leather strip shags and cotton rag shags

The next popular category of shag rugs is created with strips of material tied together to create a rug.

These can be either strips of leather or cotton, both of which are often dyed.

Some of the challenges with leather and cotton rag shag rugs are:

Loss of sizing. A starch sizing is often utilized on leather and fabric pieces used in making these shag rugs, and this washes away. The challenge with leather rugs is they are woven into a cotton foundation. Often, the cotton requires washing (especially if there are pets in the house); however, the leather strips themselves do not wash up well.

Using leather cleaning products after a wash to condition and revive the leather is occasionally needed. The cotton rag shag rugs wash up well, but tumbling may be needed to help bring life back into those fabric strips.

Loss of color. Depending on the quality of dyeing, both leather strip shags and cotton rag shags may bleed. Test for dye stability, and use the appropriate chemistry and

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solutions based on your tests. Remember pet urine can create dye bleed problems even in a colorfast rug.

Fabric unraveling and knots untying. Foot traffic tends to loosen the knots of these hand tied rugs, and strips can be pulled loose and require repair. With cotton fabric, wear and tear over time can cause the fabric strips to unravel and fray.

Polyester and viscose designer shags

The final group of shag rugs that are especially popular today are the artificial silk shag rugs. These use synthetic fibers, either viscose or polyester, crafted into shaggy, shiny creations.

Some of the challenges with synthetic shag rugs are:

Unable to hide soil. These fibers have no ability to hide soil, so these rugs quickly become grey in traffic areas. Brushing with a horsehair brush or wiping down with microfiber cloths can help grab loose soil before it begins to discolor the traffic areas.

Heavy cotton backing absorbs every spill. Many of these silky shag rugs have thin strands strung through



Synthetic silk shag strands shine while the cotton base is filthy.



A polyester shag is clean under a table and dirty in traffic areas.



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Synthetic shag fibers wear down and dull over time.



Viscose shag strands easily pull free.

a very thick cotton foundation. Spills move immediately past the strands and get soaked up into that thick cotton. This means every spill is a potential disaster that requires professional cleaning.

Tufts remove easily from these rugs. These silky strands are not knotted or tied, but rather simply looped into a backing material. If you yank any individual strand, you will easily remove it. This means traffic areas

can suffer from loose tufts, and any dusting, scrubbing or extracting can easily lead to a loss of fibers. Using air crevice tools can help with dusting as well as drying these rugs with less fiber risk.

Polyester fibers easily fray and scratch; viscose easily breaks. Polyester fibers are plastic, so they tend to scratch and wear in a way that makes them reflect light differently. These areas get dull instead of shiny

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and can sometimes be mistaken as dirty areas instead of simply as worn areas. Viscose fibers are very weak, so they tend to split and break away in traffic areas, and these areas also become dull as a result.

Protect yourself with a very thorough pre-inspection

The more time a professional rug cleaner spends on pre-inspecting a shag rug, the less time that cleaner will spend on trying to clean up after an unexpected disaster.

Carefully look over the front and back of each shag rug. Sometimes the front fibers will not have any issues to address, but the backing material may have construction or dye flaws.

Determine fiber type, dye stability and construction type. Photo-document both sides of the rug for every area of concern you might have. Share those photos with exper-



Poor backing design can bleed to the front side of the rug.

rienced professionals, if you have not cleaned a particular shag rug type before, in order to get their feedback.

Finally, if you take on the shag rug job, charge for the additional time and care the piece requires. Most cleaners turn away shag rug jobs, so the ones who do accept the challenge charge accordingly. You should as well. ■

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