

FREEZE FLOOD-DAMAGED PHOTOS, DOCUMENTS, BOOKS

If you want to save photographs, important documents, or books that have been damaged by floodwaters, the first thing to do is get them out of the water. Then, if you don't have time to care for them immediately, freeze them, an Iowa State University Extension specialist says.

"If other flood cleanup is more pressing, put flood-damaged photos, documents and books in the freezer," says Lois Warne, extension interior design specialist. "Freezing will delay further damage."

Ivan Hanthorn, head of the Preservation Department at the Iowa State University Library, agrees. "Freezing buys you time by stabilizing the situation."

The important thing is to act quickly, before mildew sets in, Hanthorn says. You have the best chance of saving items that are not mildewed already. Photos, papers and books that still are wet have not yet been attacked by mildew. Mildew doesn't grow on wet material – it grows on damp material.

If an item already is mildewed and can be replaced, throw it away. If you can't make that decision now, then freeze the item. Freezing doesn't kill mildew, but it temporarily stops mildew growth. And, freezing doesn't dry the item. Freezing simply buys time. Eventually you will have to decide what to do with each item you freeze, Hanthorn says.

How to freeze photos, documents, books

First pick the item up out of the water and hold it while it drains, Hanthorn says. Then place the item in a plastic bag, and stick it in the freezer. If you have several items of approximately the same size – such as file folders or books – you can place them upright in a milk crate or box, separated with paper toweling, butcher paper or wax paper. If you're freezing books, stand them vertically on their spines. A milk crate is a good choice for this task because it allows air flow around the items. Use a container that won't become water-logged. Pack the items just tight enough so that they remain upright.

If a book obviously is wet and is still closed, keep it closed, Hanthorn says. Don't open it or you may destroy the book. Let it drain, then freeze it.

If photos have stuck together and then dried, don't pull them apart – you could damage the emulsion layer. Get the photos wet again before attempting to separate them, or consult a professional photographer.

After the items you want to save are in the freezer, you can go back to other flood cleanup duties, Hanthorn says. You can leave the items in the freezer, literally, for years. Freezing won't hurt them. But he suggests that you deal with the items as soon as you can.

When you have time and can decide calmly, review the items you've frozen. Decide which items you really want to save and which items you can discard. Later, you can get the items out of the freezer – as many or as few at a time as you like – and dry them.

Drying frozen photos, documents, books

When you're ready to deal with the items, you may want to contract with a commercial freeze-drying company if you have items of sufficient value and quantity to be worth the expense. Hanthorn is not aware of any commercial freeze-drying companies in Iowa that specialize in library and documentary materials. However, there are companies in other states that offer flood-salvage freeze-drying services.

Or, you can air dry the items yourself. Follow these guidelines:

- Work in an area that doesn't present more problems. For example, don't dry the items in a damp basement. As the items thaw, water will drip and conditions will get humid.
- Place wet items on a surface that won't be damaged by dripping water. Or place items on a surface that has been covered with polyethylene.

- Documents and photos can be hung on a line.
- Stand books on end, fanned open. You may want to place paper towels within each book, every 50 pages or quarter inch. The towels will act as wicks and pull water out of the books.
- You may want to put paper towels underneath the items to absorb water that will drip during thawing. Change the toweling as it get wet.
- Run a fan to circulate air over and around the items as they dry.
- After books feel dry, close them squarely and stack them under a brick. Let them dry another 24 hours. This should help them resume their shape.

It may take two or three days to dry out a photo or document, Hanthorn says, and several days to dry out a book.

After they've dried, photos probably will be curled. To uncurl them, you can wash each photo carefully in a photo tray, then put them between clean white blotters under pressure. Photography blotters, which are preferable, may be available at photo supply stores, but any kind of clean white blotter would work. Change blotters as they become damp.

Or, you might want to call a commercial photographer, who may be able to help you depending on the amount of damage to the photo. A photographer may be able to make a new negative from the original photo, and print a new photo for you, Hanthorn says.

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