

Water Works

Traditional gutter systems are coming back into favor, not only for their decorative aspect, but also for their longevity. *By Martha McDonald*

Putting the final touches on the exterior of a home is an important part of the job, according to suppliers of traditional gutter systems, and one that should be considered from the beginning of the project. They also cite a growing interest in traditional styles and materials, such as half-round copper gutter systems with decorative accessories.

“Traditional gutter systems are like light fixtures and hardware,” says Gene Stucky, owner of Park City Rain Gutter, Park City, UT. “They’re an accent piece that adds a nice final touch to the house. People who put so much time and money into their homes don’t want a normal gutter system that blends in and becomes invisible. It’s like jewelry. As my wife says, ‘you wouldn’t consider yourself dressed if you didn’t accessorize.’”

What exactly are traditional gutters? The industry standard is white aluminum k-style (or ogee) gutters that are designed to blend into the house, to become invisible. Traditional gutters, on the other hand, are generally round in shape (thus the term half-round) with a single bead on the edge. Designed to be seen and to enhance the appearance of the home, these systems include decorative downspouts, brackets and leader heads. The most popular sizes are 5- and 6-in. gutters with 3- or 4-in. downspouts.



Park City Rain Gutter is the U.S. distributor for the Italian-made Minoletti copper gutter system. This typical installation shows a 6-in. single-bead half-round gutter with a round end cap. This newly installed gutter will patina beautifully over time, says owner Gene Stucky.



This zinc gutter system supplied by Park City Rain Gutter was designed to match the galvanized trim and structural connecting plates on a mountain home.

The advantages of copper, the material most widely used in traditional gutter systems, are its appearance, durability and maintenance record. Suppliers point out that copper gutter systems may cost more than aluminum ones, but they will last at least 100 years, three to four times longer than their aluminum counterparts. In addition, the copper systems have fewer seams, which are usually soldered instead of caulked. This contributes to longevity, because it is usually the caulking that fails. Copper systems are also known to be maintenance free.

European Gutters

The U.S. distributor of Minoletti rain gutters from Italy, Park City Rain Gutter has been offering traditional copper gutter systems for five years. “When we started doing installations, we looked for something that would fit in better with higher-end homes in the area,” Stucky says, “and we found this company in northern Italy. They have been manufacturing copper gutters in the traditional style for generations. It’s a

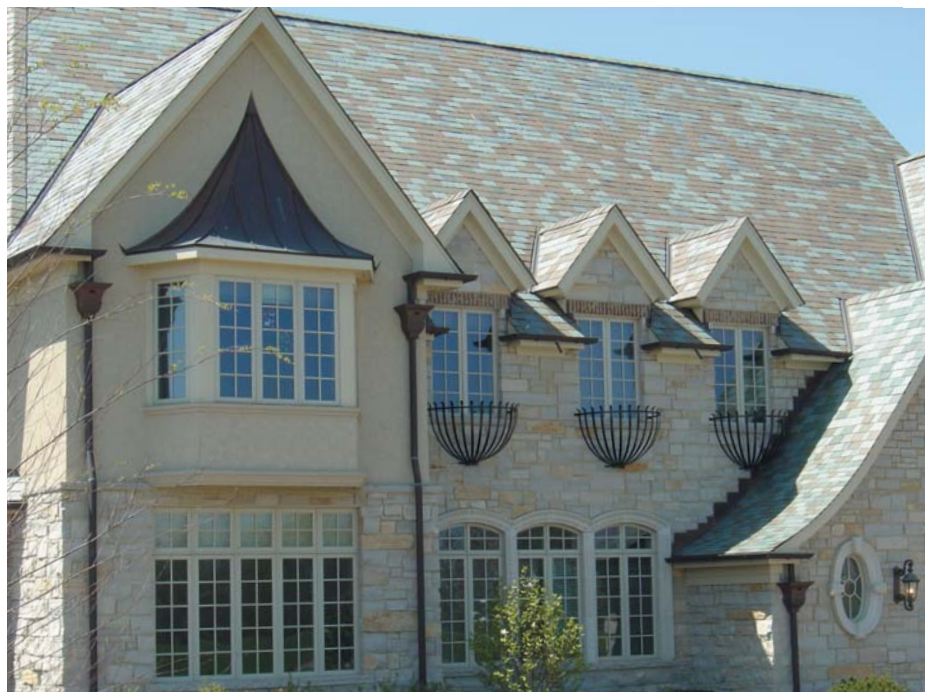
very good quality product. The traditional style works with the older homes and it also fits in well with the log and stone mountain homes we have here.”

Stucky says that there wasn’t much competition in the traditional copper gutter business five years ago, but interest has picked up and now a number of companies are offering half-round copper gutter systems. “Copper rain gutters are becoming a standard item on traditionally styled bigger homes,” he says, in areas like the Hamptons, a high-end area on New York’s Long Island.

Another company that provides half-round copper systems from Europe is Slate and Copper Sales of Erie, PA. Larry Marie, one of the original founders, says he has been offering the World Gutter System (WGS) for the past three or four years. “More architects are starting to specify it,” he says, noting that traditional half-round single-bead copper gutters for a typical home requiring 100 to 200 ft. would cost \$1,500 to \$4,000, depending on the size and height of the house. “Overall half round is more efficient – it provides a better drain – than k-style gutters,” he says,



This decorative cast-bronze dragon spout distributed by RainTrade adds to the character of the house.



Supplied by RainTrade, this copper gutter system coordinates with other copper elements on the house.



Above: Custom-sized leader heads are available from A.B. Raingutters in many styles.

Left: This standoff bracket with an ornate foot is the work of A.B. Raingutters.

“and most people know that copper lasts for close to a century. It adds value to the home.”

In Lake Bluff, IL, RainTrade Corporation offers a wide selection of gutters in aluminum, copper, galvanized steel and lead-coated copper. “The big trend now is copper,” says Mike Milliman, co-owner. “It’s a superior product. It will last four times longer than aluminum and it only costs two to three times more.”

“Half-round gutters were the traditional gutter style on homes built before 1950 and remain a popular choice on historic renovation projects, traditional renovations and new upscale custom housing,” he adds. “The copper half-round trend is back. Our

internet division, GutterSupply.com, has experienced a steady 30% annual growth rate in this category in the past three years.”

Milliman points out that one of the advantages of copper gutters are the soldered seams. “A soldered seam will join two pieces of copper into a cohesive, watertight unit that will expand and contract as one piece. Well-soldered seams contribute to the longevity of the system. In addition, there are more choices today,” he points out. “Clients can customize their orders and we can ship lengths up to 26 ft. Furthermore, if a copper half-round system is not an option, we have 20 aluminum colors available.”

An installer in the Chicago area, Matt Wilkinson of Cedar Roofing Co., LLC, of Lake Forest, IL, says that most people inquire about copper. “The market has changed dramatically in the past five years. People are putting higher-end products in their homes. They realize that it’s their best investment.”

Wilkinson puts the average price of a copper gutter system (installed) at \$8,000 to \$15,000, sometimes more, depending on the home. “Collector boxes are specified for decorative purposes,” he adds. “Copper is aesthetically quite pleasing; it goes with other natural products like stone and stucco, and it also ages well. And there’s little or no maintenance, where aluminum has sealants that would need upkeep and galvanized steel would require painting. It’s very common for us to work on original copper gutter systems that are up to 50 to 80 years old and are still functioning.”

A supplier offering a range of mid- to high-end items is A.B. Raingutters in



Slate and Copper Sales’ World Gutter System (WGS) is available in half-round, k-style and custom profiles. Accessories such as leader heads, gutter screens and rain chains are also offered.

Right: Hans Liebscher fabricated and installed this radius gutter system using 7½-ft. sections. The seams are concealed by custom brackets.

Far right: The copper gutter system for this home was created by Hans Liebscher. It includes custom hand-hammered decorative leader heads and curved downspouts to accommodate the design of the home. The twisted downspout was designed and fabricated by Liebscher to increase the flow of the water.



Anaheim, CA. While its line includes designs at the high end of the spectrum – \$900 to \$1,500 for a leader head – the company also offers decorative products in the middle price range. “Our mid-priced leader heads start at \$240 and go up to \$800, and we have more than 60 different shapes and sizes,” co-owner Albert Barlow explains. “We are trying to fill the gap between mainstream and the high end. Our niche is right in the middle.”

High-End Products

A custom high-end supplier for many years, Hans Liebscher Custom Copperworks & Sheet Metal of San Marcos, CA, manufactures its own ornamental gutters, gutter brackets, downspouts and downspout brackets and hand-hammered leader heads. The company works exclusively in copper. Hans Liebscher, who has been in the trade for more than 40 years, has had his own business for 15 years. Liebscher’s systems start at \$25,000 and can go up to \$300,000 or \$400,000. His products are also sold by Slate and Copper Sales.

“Gutter systems are not brain surgery,” he says, “but it takes a lot of knowledge and experience. It’s not just a matter of controlling water; a gutter system is also an architectural item, like a frame around a nice picture. A gutter can highlight the eave or cornice of a house or building, while brackets enhance the look of the gutter system.” Liebscher adds, “Something as mundane as a downspout can be turned into an architectural statement by adding a twisted or fluted design.”

Liebscher warns against caulking the seams of a copper gutter. “If a copper gutter is caulked, it is practically ruined from the start. The caulk will not withstand longitudinal expansion and contraction. The solder should be well sweated into the seam with a ½-in. minimum penetration. This is more important for the life span of the gutter than the thickness of the copper.”

Most suppliers would agree that quite often the gutter system is an afterthought. “Most of the time, very little attention is paid to the gutters,” says Liebscher. “Architects should factor draining and downspouts from the initial design stage,” adds Wilkinson, “rather than adding them as an afterthought.”

Like others, Liebscher points to the long life and beauty of a copper gutter system: “A well-installed system can last well over 100 years or even more. I personally have duplicated gutters or downspouts from homes dating more than 100 years back. The copper shows no weakness or corrosion. Copper will corrode (develop a patina) rather quickly in the first few years. As the years go by, this process slows down because the patina acts as a self-protective coating. It makes the copper age gracefully.” ■

