Garage door troubleshooting

There are two sensors on both sides of the garage door to check for spiders, leaves or dirt.

By Jim Hurley

Long ago, everyone enjoyed stopping in the driveway, getting out of their car, manually opening the garage door, and getting back in their car to drive into the garage, because they had no choice. (Unless, like my dad, you had children to assign to the task.) Thank goodness, the automatic garage door is a reliable feature of our homes that we take for granted – unless it stops working.

Garage door styles have come full circle, in a manner of speaking. Originally "carriage house" doors were double wide panels, with big tee-strap hinges on each side, that opened out manually. Over time, carriage house doors were replaced by single panel tilt-up doors which were then replaced by roll-up doors. Now, new roll-up doors are made to look like the old-fashioned carriage house doors. Everything old is new again.

When your opener stops working, your first goal is probably to get the car out of the garage since you were leaving for some reason. The solution is to open the door manually. At the front of the door, near the top of the bar that connects the door to the opener, there is a clip with a pull cord attached. Pull down on the cord and the clip should click into a downward position. This releases the door from the opener's drive shaft. You should now be able to lift and roll the door open easily. If the door does not open easily, there is more trouble than just the opener not working. We will get to that below. For now, take care of your errand, but when you close the garage door be careful to bring it down gently (do not let it drop!)

When you get back it is time to start debugging the opener's problem. First check to see that the opener can work. If the motor does not try to run or even make a sound when you push the button, there may be a problem with the outlet that it is plugged into. Get a step ladder, unplug the opener from the outlet and plug the opener into a heavy duty, (16 gauge), extension cord. Plug the extension cord into an outlet that you know is working and see if the garage door opener runs. Remember that you disconnected the drive from the door when you pulled the clip down, so the motor may run without the door going up.

If the opener runs, your next step is to restore power to the ceiling outlet. Check the circuit breaker panel for a tripped breaker. If the breakers are all on, then it is possible the ceiling outlet is wired into a CGFI outlet somewhere. Check each of the CGFI outlets, (I sense another article coming), to make sure they are working. If you find one to reset, check back on your opener's outlet. If you cannot get the outlet back on, you can leave the opener plugged into the extension cord and still use the door until your handyman or electrician comes to fix the outlet.

If the opener refuses to run, it is time to call the garage door repairman. There might be a sticker by the opener button on the wall of your garage of the company that installed the unit, or you can search Garage Door Repair online. A specialist will have the right parts, the experience to adjust the new opener if needed, and get the job done with little inconvenience to you.

Was the door heavy and difficult to lift when you disconnected it from the drive earlier? The springs on your garage door counterbalance the weight of the door. When a spring breaks, the door becomes too heavy for the power opener to lift and the motor will start acting sketchy, like starting to open and stopping, or pulling with a loud racket. When this happens, unless you're in the Super Handy Do-It-Yourselfer category, it's best to call the garage door repairman.

One other problem that may occur is that the door goes up but will not come down. There is an electric sensor near the ground on either side of the door. These are a safety feature that prevents the door from closing if anything (like your car or a child) is in the way. Check to see if something was placed or fell in front of the sensors, or they might become misaligned. Once, we had a spider build her nest in the sensor and block the beam with a leaf. The sensors have a red and green light. If the path is clear and they can "see" each other, the lights will be lit. If there is something blocking the path, the lights will either not light or blink. Check the sensors, clear the path, or adjust the alignment to make the lights stay on, this should fix the closing problem.

Jim Hurley is an independent handyman with over 25 years of experience in residential repairs. Hopefully this free advice is helpful to someone attempting Do-It-Yourself home repairs. The information presented is intended for informational purposes and for use by persons having appropriate technical skill, at their own discretion and risk.