FREE HOMEOWNER GUIDE

Outdoor outlet not working? Start with rain and the GFCI

The answer, first

An outdoor outlet that quit has almost always tripped its GFCI, and in Portland the reason is usually water. Outdoor outlets are required to have GFCI protection, and the device doing the protecting is often not outside at all. It can be in the garage, a bathroom, the basement, or the panel.

Find it and reset it. If it will not hold, either the outlet box is still wet or the thing you plugged into it is.

Reset it in this order

The front and back outlets usually share one GFCI, so the outlet that got wet may not be the one you are trying to use. That is why the first step covers all of them.

- [ ] Unplug everything from every outdoor outlet, front and back
- [ ] Open the cover on the dead outlet. If it has Test and Reset buttons, press Reset until it clicks
- [ ] No buttons, or no click? Reset the GFCIs in the garage, bathrooms, basement, and laundry
- [ ] Check the panel for a tripped breaker, or a breaker with a Test button, and switch it fully OFF, then ON
- [ ] Look for an indoor wall switch or timer. Eave and porch outlets meant for lighting are often switched
- [ ] Test with a lamp or charger you know works before you plug your equipment back in

How the water gets in

The old flat flip covers only seal when nothing is plugged in. Plug in a cord and the lid sits propped open, facing the weather, and wind-driven rain goes straight in. Even a closed cover leaks once its gasket has hardened, the box has pulled away from the siding, or the caulk along the top edge has failed. The cover that works is the deep in-use type, sometimes called a bubble cover, which closes over the cord. That is what code calls for now where an outlet is exposed to rain.

A GFCI with water in the box will trip again the moment you reset it, and that is correct behavior. Leave everything unplugged and give it a dry day or two. If it then resets and holds, the device is fine but the cover or the seal is not, and the next storm will do it again. If it trips in dry weather with nothing plugged in, the device has likely corroded inside and needs replacing. Outdoor GFCIs do not last as long as indoor ones.

It may be what you plugged in

Often the outlet is fine and the leak is in the load. The usual suspects are light strings with cracked sockets, a cord connection lying in wet grass or a puddle, a pressure washer, a pond or fountain pump, and an old

extension cord that was never rated for outdoor use.

Unplug everything, reset, and add things back one at a time. The one that trips it is your answer. For winter lighting, our post on holiday lights tripping the GFCI walks through the same process string by string.

When to stop and call

Do not solve a tripping outdoor outlet by swapping in an ordinary outlet, or by running a cord out a window from an indoor outlet that has no GFCI. The GFCI is what stands between a wet cord and a shock. Call us if any of these apply.

- [ ] The cover is cracked, missing, or will not close
- [ ] You can see water, rust, or green corrosion in the outlet
- [ ] The GFCI will not reset after several dry days
- [ ] It trips with nothing plugged in
- [ ] You feel a tingle from anything plugged in outside
- [ ] The outlet is scorched, buzzing, or loose in the wall

What an electrician does to fix it for good

The lasting repair is a weather-resistant GFCI receptacle, an in-use cover, and a box that is sealed to the siding again. If the outdoor outlets share a GFCI with a bathroom or the garage, we can separate them, so a rainstorm no longer shuts off the bathroom. We also check the wiring that feeds anything beyond the outlet, such as post lights or a shed, since buried runs get nicked and soaked.

If you need more power outside for lighting, tools, or a hot tub, a dedicated outdoor circuit is the answer, and you get the price before the work starts. A dead outdoor outlet itself is routine electrical repair.

Frequently asked questions

Why did my outdoor outlet stop working after it rained?

Water got into the outlet box or into something plugged into it, and the GFCI shut the power off. Unplug everything, let it dry for a day or two, then press Reset on the GFCI. If it holds, the cover or seal needs attention before the next storm. If it will not reset once dry, the outlet has probably corroded and needs replacing.

Where is the reset for my outside outlet?

Check under the cover of each outdoor outlet first. If none has Test and Reset buttons, the GFCI is indoors, most often in the garage or a bathroom, sometimes in the basement or laundry. It can also be a breaker with a Test button in the panel. One GFCI usually protects all the outdoor outlets.

My outdoor outlet has no reset button. Is that a problem?

Not if a GFCI somewhere else protects it. To check, plug in a lamp, then press Test on each GFCI in the house and see whether the lamp goes out. If nothing shuts it off, the outlet may have no GFCI protection, which is common on older homes. Code has required it outdoors since 1973, and it is worth having added.

What kind of cover should an outdoor outlet have?

An in-use cover, the deep kind that closes over a plugged-in cord. Flat flip covers do not keep water out while a cord is plugged in, which is when most outdoor outlets get wet. The receptacle itself should be a weather-resistant type made for outdoor use.

Can I replace an outdoor outlet myself?

It is possible, but outdoor outlets are easy to get wrong. A GFCI has separate line and load terminals, and reversing them keeps the outlet from working or from protecting you correctly. The device has to be weather-resistant and the box has to be sealed. If it keeps tripping after replacement, have a licensed electrician handle it.

Sources

1. Home Electrical Safety Checklist (Publication 513), U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission. https://www.cpsc.gov/s3fs-public/513.pdf
2. GFCI Fact Sheet (Publication 099), U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission. https://www.cpsc.gov/s3fs-public/099_0.pdf
3. Electrical Safety (safety tip sheet), National Fire Protection Association (NFPA). https://www.nfpa.org/-/media/project/storefront/catalog/files/safety-tip-sheets/electricalsafetytips.pdf

> **Need a licensed electrician in the Portland area?**
> Call Smiley Electric at (503) 484-7556 (Mon–Sat, 7am–5pm) or visit smileyelectric.net/contact. For sparks, smoke, a burning smell or a hot panel, turn off the power if it is safe and call right away.

Reviewed by Joshua Smiley, owner & master electrician, Smiley Electric. Last reviewed November 13, 2026. Online version: smileyelectric.net/help/outdoor-outlet-not-working/. General information, not a substitute for an on-site inspection.

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