

FastFacts

About Exterior Painting

by Mariangela Pfister

The sun is shining, a nice breeze is blowing, so it's time to paint your wood-frame house. Do thoughts of painting send a winter chill through you? Painting is not the easiest or least expensive home maintenance job, but it is one of the most beneficial for your house. Paint adds a protective layer to your wood that, if maintained, extends the life of your wood. Do-it-yourself house painting projects aren't for everyone. However, the information that follows could be useful even if you decide that your job requires outside assistance, guiding those you hire.

Before you begin the paint removal work, however, try to determine what caused the paint to fail in the first place. Is it the fact that it's just been a long time since the house was painted or is the cause more serious? For example, a leaking roof, bad flashing or poor drainage systems can cause a house to hold moisture and thus cause the paint to fail. Blown-in insulation without a proper vapor barrier can also cause this same type of problem, as can poor caulking jobs. Before you tackle your painting job, make certain the cause of paint failure has been identified and corrected, or your paint will continue to fail.

Let's continue by dispelling a popular myth. You do not have to remove all the paint from your wood before you can repaint it. New paint will adhere to sound paint surfaces just as well as it will to bare wood, so you need to remove only the paint that is failing. Also, no matter what, resist the urge to power wash or "blast" your wood surfaces with anything (even air)! Power washing forces water into the pores of the wood, and blasting of any kind can damage your wood. We also caution against the use of heat removal systems, such as heat plates, hot air guns or blow torches. They are difficult to control and can easily cause fires and/or heat damage your wood. So, what are the paint removal methods for do-it-yourself jobs? These methods are low tech and low cost but require a substantial amount of elbow grease and no fear of heights.



A poorly prepared paint surface. Note how the edges of the scraped sections have not been feathered.

The next step in removing the failing paint is to choose a period of work time where rain is not expected for several days (this might be the trickiest part of the entire job). Then, prepare your surroundings and yourself for the task ahead. Remember that any building painted before the mid-1970s most likely contains lead. Also, until relatively

recently, many paints also contained mercury. Lead and mercury are toxic materials, and their removal must be accomplished very carefully. Be sure to cover all surfaces so as to catch the chips and dust that will result. You should wear a good fitting respirator (lead dust can be inhaled), goggles, hat and overalls that cover all bare skin (lead can also be absorbed through the skin). On another cautionary note, pregnant and nursing women and children should keep clear of the work site until the job is completed and the area has been completely cleaned. Windows should be kept tightly closed during the project.

First of all, if your paint is simply chalking, clean it with a natural-bristle brush, some detergent and water. Then rinse it thoroughly with gentle garden hose pressure and allow to dry completely. For paint surfaces that are actually failing (the paint is no longer adhering to the surface) the trick is finding an effective, safe and non-damaging way to remove the paint. For many wood surfaces, simple hand scraping and sanding are very effective.

So, after you and your environment are all outfitted, use a sharp, good quality scraper to remove all the loose sections of paint. Using a pushing motion, work



Well-prepared and painted wood siding. Note how smooth the surface appears and how well paint is adhering.

a time. It makes the job seem more manageable. Also, take care not to gouge the wood. Once you've removed all the loose paint you can, prepare a sanding block with sandpaper. Resist the urge to use power sanders. They're difficult to control especially when you're on a ladder, and they can mar the wood. Place your sandpaper in such a way as to sand *toward* the area you've just scraped. The idea is to reduce the thickness of the seam that was created when you scraped. In essence, you want to feather the edges. This way when you repaint, you won't have a seam that will allow moisture to penetrate and cause your paint to fail. If you don't feather your seam, you'll find that the paint that was sound and didn't need scraping this year will have failed within a couple of years. I've done this job myself several times, so I don't give this advice lightly. I know how painstaking it is to prepare the surface properly, but it really is worth the effort in the long run.

Once you've completed the scraping and sanding steps, check your wood for any unsound surfaces that need to be repaired. Then lightly wash your wood surface with water and a cloth to remove dust and any surface dirt. This method of cleaning doesn't push any water into the wood and dries quickly. Once the area is thoroughly dry, you can begin painting. Use a good quality paint brush that is recommended for the type of paint you're using. We're often asked what type of paint to use. Generally, a quality oil-based or alkyd primer can be used effectively on bare wood surfaces or surfaces where you don't know whether the topcoat is oil or latex. Oil or alkyd

primers will stick to oil, alkyd or latex topcoats and will allow oil, alkyd and latex topcoats to stick to them. However, many painting contractors like latex primers. They say that the latex primers are more forgiving in high-moisture parts of the country. No matter what paint you prefer, make certain that your primer and topcoat are compatible. Also, if you don't prime, be sure that your new topcoat is compatible with the old paint. For example, a latex paint over old oil or old alkyd paint is likely to fail. In the end, it's wise to follow the manufacturer's instructions.

After you've applied your one coat of primer, you're now ready to apply your topcoat! Two applications of a high-quality paint is usually preferable. Try not to apply the paint too thickly, so as to allow for better adhesion and appropriate drying. Also, be sure to follow the can's instructions carefully regarding drying times and temperatures. Keep in mind that if it's very hot or humid, your paint will take longer to dry. If the paint can says don't paint if the temperature drops below 50 degrees or rain is expected, then I usually wouldn't suggest painting if the temperature is going to drop below 50 degrees or rain is in the forecast that night. So that means that in Ohio, your window of opportunity to paint when no rain is predicted and the temperatures are moderate is about two days! Seriously, early fall is often a good time to paint because temperatures usually cooperate and you can hit dry spells.

Good preparation and using good products, along with Mother Nature's cooperation, will result in a paint job that not only looks nice, but also will last for many years to come.

For more information about exterior painting, contact the Ohio History Connection's State Historic Preservation Office.

Mariangela Pfister is Deputy State Historic Preservation Officer for Technical Preservation Services for the Ohio History Connection's State Historic Preservation Office. She holds a master's degree in history from The Ohio State University.

1/02

OHIO HISTORY CONNECTION

800 E. 17th Ave.
Columbus, OH 43211-2474
614.298.2000
ohiohistory.org/shpo

This publication is made possible in part by a grant from the U.S. Department of the Interior's Historic Preservation Fund, administered by the Ohio History Connection's State Historic Preservation Office. U.S. Department of the Interior regulations prohibit unlawful discrimination in departmental federally assisted programs on the basis of race, color, national origin, age or disability. Any person who believes he or she has been discriminated against in any program, activity or facility operated by a recipient of federal assistance should write to: Office of Equal Opportunity, National Park Service, 1849 C St., N.W., Washington, DC 20240.