HOMEOWNER REPAIR GUIDE

CHOOSING A NEW EXTERIOR DOOR

Should you choose wood, fiberglass, or steel for your replacement door? Let's talk about the pros and cons of each, and then you can decide for yourself.

WOOD DOORS

Wooden doors have been around since doors were invented. No doubt, the door you are replacing is wood. Think about why you need to replace it. Has it come unglued? Does it swell up and stick during certain seasons? Does cold air leak in around the edges, no matter how well you insulate it? All these common problems, along with a certain lack of strength/security, are the less desirable qualities of a wooden door. Nevertheless, people have made wood their primary choice for generations, not only because wood has a high weight-to-strength ratio, but also because wood, a natural product, brings a warmth to the entry of your home that no other material has yet matched. This psychological aspect should not be ignored.

FIBERGLASS DOORS

Fiberglass doors are better insulated than wood doors, and have much the same kind of weatherstripping. They can be grained and stained to look like wood, but are lighter in weight. Fiberglass doors are less likely to absorb moisture, so they will not rot, swell, or bow.

STEEL DOORS

With recent improvements in steel door technology, however, some people are choosing the practical advantages of metal. Steel doors eliminate all the sticking, ungluing, and vulnerability. Moreover, steel doors are much more energy efficient. Because a steel door is a hollow shell, it can be filled with insulation and thus made much more effective at keeping the cold out – so effective, in fact, that no exterior storm door is needed to retain heat in your house. While you do have to install a steel door carefully to prevent air from leaking around it, this type of door allows the use of a magnetic seal (like the one that seals your refrigerator door) – the best weatherstripping system now available. Added to all this, steel doors, when properly installed, are much stronger and resistant to intruders than wood or fiberglass.

WHAT TO LOOK FOR

When choosing a new exterior door, what should you look for? If you want to preserve the historical "look" of your house, you'll want a door that matches the existing one you are replacing, one that fits the age and design of your home. There are numerous sources of wood doors with historically accurate features, and some steel and fiberglass doors that duplicate the styling of original wood doors of various styles and periods.

To get an energy-efficient door:

1. Look first at the weatherstripping. If you are buying a metal door, select one with a magnetic seal. This system is not usually available with fiberglass or wood, so you'll have to get the most efficient weatherstripping system you can find.

2. Next, look for a high R-value (indicating the degree to which the door is insulated).
3. Then, look for a spring-loaded threshold, which you can easily adjust later to give a good seal at the bottom of the door.
4. Lastly, look at the manufacturer. Get a “better name” door – don’t buy a cheap one.

INSTALLATION OPTIONS

Doors also vary according to how they are installed. One type, known as a “**replacement door**,” can be installed in about three hours. The door is slightly smaller than the one it is replacing, so both door and frame slip into the present opening. You simply remove the interior trim, fasten door and frame in place, and then replace the trim. Readily available in steel and fiberglass, these are good, reasonably priced options for door replacement. (Wood replacement doors can be specially ordered, which increases the cost, but are less expensive to install.)

With other types of pre-hung doors, you’ll need to remove all the existing door jambs down to the framing before putting in the replacement. Expect to spend the day installing one of these doors, and you will probably pay more for it.

ONE ADDITIONAL NOTE

Many of the heavily-insulated steel and fiberglass entry doors have plastic moldings around the windows. Some experts warn against installing a storm door outside this type of entry door, because sunlight can generate heat build-up in the air space between the doors, and the heat can cause the plastic molding to soften and deform.

Home Repair Resource center

Home Repair Resource Center empowers homeowners to maintain their homes for sustainable and diverse communities.

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