HOMEOWNER REPAIR GUIDE

EXTERIOR HOUSE PAINTING

If you are contracting

When obtaining bids to have your house painted, you should discuss with each contractor several important issues. Because preparation and painting are so labor-intensive, the price that a contractor quotes for a job will frequently depend on how you define the quality of workmanship you are seeking. For that reason, in addition to discussing the type and color of paint that will be used, it's important to clarify the work that the contractor will do BEFORE the paint is applied.

DEFINE THE QUALITY YOU WANT

The preparation work that a painter does will not only affect how your house looks – it will also help determine how long the paint job will last. Because in most communities the painter does not need to obtain a permit for this job, you will not be protected by an inspection by the Building Department when the work is completed. That makes it all the more important to discuss with the contractor just what kind of a result you are looking for, and what it will cost.

If you signal to the contractor that you are only concerned with getting the lowest price, the most likely place to reduce costs will be in the preparation. In a worst case scenario, paint can simply be applied over the existing surface, with no cleaning or removal of the old paint. (A house painted in this way will usually start peeling in short order.) The other extreme is to have the old paint removed completely, down to the bare wood; while this will produce the most long-lasting result, the preparation costs can be higher than your budget will allow. Negotiating a “middle ground” in such cases might give you acceptable quality and longevity within a price you can afford.

REPAIRS BEFORE PAINTING

What kinds of preparation might be involved? Before painting, the contractor should make all needed repairs to the siding and trim:

- replacing rotted, decayed, or badly cracked wood;
- securing loose siding or nails;
- removing any hooks and nails that are no longer in use; and
- covering over nail holes, rusty nail heads, and small cracks with vinyl spackling.

This is also the time when caulk and glazing should be checked, and replaced as needed – especially around your doors and windows, and where siding butts up against a roof slope or masonry. Most painters can do these minor carpentry jobs as part of the preparation process, or you might decide to lower your cost by doing some of the work yourself.

DEALING WITH OLD PAINT

The biggest problem will be dealing with the old paint that has built up on the surface of your house over the years. In most cases, that old paint will have cracked or “checkered,” allowing moisture to get behind the paint layer.

Before applying a new coat, the contractor must remove that damaged paint.

HOUSES BUILT BEFORE 1978

However, if your house was built before 1978, there is a good chance that one or more of those layers of old paint may contain lead. In dealing with any loose, blistering, or peeling areas, you should make sure that the painter will take care to protect your family and the environment from this lead-based paint.

The EPA has a special set of practices that contractors are required to follow under the Lead Renovation, Repair and Painting (RRP) Rule. If you have a pre-1978 home, make sure that your contractor is an EPA Certified Renovator under the RRP program and follows lead-safe practices. Even if you don't utilize one of these licensed or certified contractors, you should discuss how the painter proposes to remove deteriorated paint.

PROHIBITED PAINT REMOVAL PRACTICES

Because of the danger when lead-laden dust is released into the atmosphere or contaminates the soil around your house, the EPA specifically prohibits contractors from using certain paint removal practices, including (1) open flame burning or torching of painted surfaces, (2) use of a heat gun above 1100° Fahrenheit, and (3) power sanding, grinding, planing, and blasting without the use of a shroud or containment system connected to a HEPA vacuum.

HUD rules, which may apply to certain projects, also prohibit dry scraping, dry sanding, and the use of volatile chemical paint strippers without proper ventilation.

So, what *can* the contractor do to remove chipping or peeling paint? The best solution is for the painter to remove as much loose paint as possible by wet scraping and following the EPA rules for containment and control of lead dust and lead paint chips. Heat, sanding, and grinding may also be used, as long as temperatures remain below 1100° and all dust and debris is captured in containment or a HEPA vacuum–connected shroud. Then, if desired, the whole house can be washed down with a detergent like TSP (applied at low-pressure “wash” setting that doesn't disturb the old paint), rinsed well, and allowed to dry completely before the paint is applied. This cleaning will remove dirt and chalking (from oxidized paint), giving a better surface for the new paint to adhere to. Keep in mind, however, that under EPA rules, the contractor must capture all dust and debris, including that in waste water, to prevent contamination of the soil.

FILLING AND PRIMING

After removing the loose paint, the painter can fill in any “craters” (areas where the bare wood is lower than the painted areas around them) with exterior vinyl spackling, so they come up level with the surrounding areas. (This method is 100% safer than sanding lead-based paint, and will give a neat finish when painted.) If you need to cut costs, you may want to skip this step, at least on the less visible areas of the house; the process does not increase the longevity of the job, but will result in a nicer “look.”

PRIMING IS ESSENTIAL

Priming, however, is essential. While an entire coat of primer is best, having the painter spot-prime any bare wood or spackling is an acceptable compromise.

PROBLEM AREAS

Your cost will also be affected by any “problem areas” that require special treatment. If there are areas where paint fails repeatedly, for example, you'll want to talk with the contractor about how to solve the problem. Blistering paint

can be caused by condensation in the outer walls of your house, particularly outside high-moisture areas like bathrooms and kitchens. You may wish to have small louvered vents installed in the siding to increase air flow and help keep these areas dry. If there are metal surfaces where rust has built up, the painter should scrape them and apply a rust-inhibiting primer, or use a rust-converter to stabilize the surface.

CHOOSING THE PAINT

Find out what type of paint your contractor is recommending for the job – it can affect how long your paint job will last. Latex paint will let water evaporate through it without blistering and peeling, but it expands and contracts at a different rate than oil-based paint. Your choice will primarily depend on the paint that is already on your house, although there are primers that will allow you to switch from one type to the other. Regardless of whether you'll be using oil or latex, make sure the paint is medium grade or better. Also, if you are changing colors, ask whether one coat will be sufficient to hide the old color; with some combinations, you may need to use – and pay for – a second coat.

WHAT TO PUT IN THE CONTRACT

ISSUE	WHAT TO DISCUSS AND INCLUDE
Weather	Your contract should specify that painting be done only when the surfaces to be painted are thoroughly dry and when no rain is expected before the new paint can dry. The temperature – even at night – should remain above 50° F to allow the paint to cure properly. (If you MUST have the painting done in cold weather, make sure the painter will use one of the new paints designed for weather down to 35° F.)
Protecting your property	The contractor should agree to repair or replace any gutters or other areas damaged during the course of the preparation or painting. Include in your contract the contractor's promise that all work will be done in a neat and workmanlike manner. Plants, sidewalks, and other areas around your house should be covered with protective tarps, to prevent damage to those surfaces, and the contractor should agree to clean up immediately all accidental drips, spills, or overspray – onto a driveway, off the dormers onto your roof, off the trim onto your brick house, etc.
Warranty and insurance	Ask what warranty will be provided on the work (both from the manufacturer on the product and from the contractor on the workmanship), and what insurance protection the painter has in case of injury to his crew and/or damage to your property.

BE THERE

You should plan to be home when the work is done – you don't need to be an expert to spot sloppy work!

If you decide to use a painter who does not provide these protections, you may trade a lower initial cost for long-term problems.

Home Repair Resource center

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

WWW.HRRC-CH.ORG **+1.216.381.6100** **2520 Noble Road, Cleveland Heights, OH 44121**

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