

# The New York Times

NEW YORK, THURSDAY, JULY 14, 2011

THE PRAGMATIST

## Please, Don't Rush the Painter



TONY CENICOLA/THE NEW YORK TIMES

EVERY summer, thousands of homeowners entrust their homes to college-age painters, possibly on the theory that if you're smart enough to matriculate, you can smear paint on a flat surface. Seriously, how could you mess it up?

To the dozens of customers who asked precisely that question in the 1980s, soon after my college buddies and I left the job: you're about to find out.

I recently embarked on an exterior painting job on my home, and given my experience in college and after, I had more hubris than you can dump in a five-gallon bucket. Partway into the project, I decided to call on a few painting experts — not to get advice, mind you, just to trade war stories.

Instead, I learned everything that my old bosses never taught me, tips that can easily make the difference between a two-year paint job and a 12-year paint job.

My new mentors were Carl Minchew, the director of color technology at Benjamin Moore; Chris Ring, regional sales manager for ProTect Painters, a nationwide company based in Ann Arbor, Mich.; and Randy Schuetz, a vice president at Valspar.

The first task, my panel said, is to determine whether you really need a paint job. Phrased differently, How long does paint last?

"That's the eternal question," Mr. Minchew said. "The eternal answer is, it depends."

## Don't Rush The Painter

By BOB TEDESCHI

Roughly, many homeowners will go between seven and 10 years before they notice fading or chalking, both of which signify that the protective quality of the enamel is diminishing. Protection is the key. Old or damaged paint is ugly, but it also exposes raw wood to water. Rotting wood attracts carpenter ants, and carpenter ants, as everybody knows, attract second mortgages.

So for homeowners who have not yet documented winter's damage, a reckoning is in order.

Inspect the siding and trim, especially near drains and gutters, where ice and water may have taken a toll. If the damage or paint erosion is significant, pull out the calendar to plan the job. Schedule one full day to clean the house exterior with a pressure washer. A week later, you will need at least a day to scrape, sand, caulk and prime the worn spots. At least one full day after that, you can start painting.

How long will the painting itself take? Mr. Ring said three professional painters would need three or four days to complete a typical three-bedroom colonial. A pair of novices, he said, would probably need seven to 10 days. (If, somehow, your home was last painted before 1978, when lead paint was taken off the market, or if you have vinyl siding, your job just got more complicated. Consult a professional.)

Once your schedule is set, go rent the two large items you will need: a pressure washer (about \$77 a day) and a 24-foot extension ladder, which is big enough to suit most homes (about \$29 a day).

The economics of a do-it-yourself paint job shift noticeably if you include the cost of a hospital visit, so be careful. Don't step higher on the ladder than recommended and, when moving side to side, keep your belt buckle within the uprights, Mr. Schuetz said. Never work alone, either. Partners can anchor the bottom of the ladder when it is on uneven ground, and they can watch for power lines and other hazards.

Pressure washers require caution, too. A friend blew a hole through his forearm while using the narrowest nozzle, which yields the highest pressure. It barely missed an artery. You'll use wider nozzles, so the risk of injury is lower. Still, point the washer away from things that breathe.

If you have mold or mildew on the house, use a cleaning solution with one cup of bleach for every gallon of water. A week later, when the house is dry and any fungus is finally dead, you're ready for the serious prep work.

Bring the ladder, caulk (Dap Alex Plus, 10.1 ounces cost about \$3), a good scraper (Master Painter's Allway 2.5-inch scraper with soft-grip handle is \$7.50), a screwdriver and a boombox. The screwdriver is for removing downspouts, the caulk is for sealing gaps and the boombox is for your sanity. It's also less antisocial than an iPod.

Also, two sheets of sandpaper, one 80-grit and another 180-grit (about 80 cents apiece), to smooth out scraped areas. Buy primer for covering those areas (Benjamin Moore Fresh Start Superior Primer costs about \$37 a gallon), a two-gallon paint bucket (Leaktite's is \$5.50) and a hook (\$2.50 or so) to hang the bucket on the ladder and keep your hands free. Don't forget rags to wipe up scrapings, paint drips and errant strokes (a Painter's Choice one-pound bag is \$3.30), and if you are unsure what top coat you want, buy paint samples, too.

Finally, choose brushes wisely. Good ones, which usually have tight, compact bristles, are expensive. But bad ones are excruciating. You need a four-inch brush for siding (Purdy's costs \$28), and a 2.5-inch, angled brush for trim (Wooster's is \$12). If you buy a good brush, never let it dry out while loaded with paint, and clean it thoroughly at day's end. If you buy a bad one, have a nice day.

As you prime, remember that professional painters "follow the sun," meaning they work around the corner from the sunny side of the house. This prevents paint from drying too quickly (more on that later), and it prevents you from dying of heat stroke. I failed to follow the sun, and I roasted the back of my neck. Extreme heat — think of the recent heat wave — may also cause paint to dry too fast, so check the manufacturer's label.

I also forgot how much bees love gutters until I climbed my ladder, brush in hand, and a yellow jacket strafed my face. It flew off when I flailed my brush at it. (That streak of wet paint across the window? A testament to my bee-fighting brilliance.) Spare yourself some high-altitude bee drama by gently banging the gutter with your ladder before you ascend.

Prep work is otherwise devoid of nuance. The goal is to create a smooth surface, because wet paint will run off sharp edges and leave those areas with little protection.

After the prepping, test your samples on patches of the siding. The next day, visit the areas in the morning, at midday and in the evening. Choose your color, then give in to your spouse's choice and live to fight another day. We picked white.

Most reputable shops will mix your paint without being asked. If they don't, ask. The less manual stirring you have to do, the better.

Finally, the main event. Cover the bushes with a dropcloth (Film-Gard, 10 by 25 feet, \$12), mix the paint, partly fill the bucket and ascend.

I mentioned our painting transgressions in college. We committed two major ones, and both involved rushing.

For one, we routinely swarmed the house from all sides. Professionals paint from one side of a wall to the other, and blend the sections of paint before they dry. If the paint dries before you can blend, the paint job will be marred by seams, or "lap marks," much like a certain crimson-colored house in Ridgefield, Conn., circa 1985.

Second, we swore by paint pads because they spread paint quickly. But novices can spread paint too thin with a pad by squeezing it as its paint supply dwindles. The job may look fine initially, but the paint can gradually fade into blotches.

My panelists suggested using a brush, which drags noticeably when there is little paint left.

Even with a brush, though, you can still spread paint too thin. Mr. Schuetz said a 10-foot-square area should require a quart of paint, so fill your first bucket with exactly one quart, see how much you cover, and adjust your technique accordingly.

I had already painted part of my house with a pad before our conversation. I checked it, and, sure enough, the paint was thin in places. My panel said a second coat is a good idea, to cover missed spots and double the job's overall protection.

Of course, during the New York area's monsoon season, painting was not on the agenda. Mr. Ring said his crews don't paint on days when the chance of rain is 40 percent. "If it sprinkles, wait a day," he said. "If it rains hard, wait a couple days."

I waited. And waited. Finally, I got back out with a brush in hand and took it slow.

When I was done, the paint looked thick and bright and free of lap marks. Nothing like that crimson-colored house in Ridgefield.