Stripping Exterior Paint

by Walter Jowers

Just about all old buildings have paint problems — some peeling here, some alligatoring there, some just plain unsightly buildup. And sooner or later, all old buildings have to be stripped of paint — at least partially — to allow a proper repainting.

Generally, you want to take the paint off an old building in the following situations:

- It's peeling badly.
- There are so many coats that the paint is alligatoring and losing its bond with the substrate.
- The paint is so thick it obscures details such as column capitals or intricate moulding profiles.

Before we talk about stripping methods, here's an important safety warning: Just about all pre-1950 paint contains lead. You don't want to breathe it or eat it. It can cause poisoning in adults, brain damage in children, and can kill pets. Pregnant women shouldn't go near lead paint dust or chips. And anybody working around lead-paint dust should wear a properly-rated mask or respirator. Read the labels on the masks to see if the equipment will do the job. Don't smoke or eat on the jobsite, and wash your work clothes at the end of every workday.

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Peeling Paint

Peeling paint is usually caused by moisture problems—things like gutter leaks, rising damp (in which water is conducted up foundation walls into siding, trim, etc.), vapor drive from poorly ventilated bathrooms and kitchens; or, sometimes, chimneys. In some cases, you cure the moisture problem first — by fixing the gutters, getting water away from the foundation, installing fans in the kitchen and bath, or lining the chimney. With that done, it's time to get rid of the peeling paint.

The good news about peeling paint is that it's usually easy to get off. All you need is a hand-held scraper, some extra blades, and a file. You can get a lot of use out of one scraper blade if you sharpen it with a file frequently as you work. I like the plastic scrapers made by Hyde (54 Eastford Road, Southbridge, MA 01550) — the big black ones with the knob up over the blade. I like hand scrapers because they don't have to be hooked up to an extension cord, they work well, and they take off peeling paint in chunks, creating relatively little dust. And they're cheap—around ten dollars. It's a good idea to wear leather gloves when you work with a scraper. If the tool slips—and occasionally, it *will* slip—the blade edges can take a pretty good bit out of your finger.

I don't recommend using power scrapers, any and all drill attachments, and power grinders.

Power scrapers. I tried one of the widely advertised power scrapers once. It made a lot of racket and shook my hands until they were numb, but left the paint unmarred. I could have done better with my fingernails. And they cost about $50 bucks.

Drill attachments. Sanding discs and drums throw a lot of lead-laden dust around for about 10 seconds, then clog up and become useless. Worst of all are those queer devices with metal fingers attached to a drum, which, when the fingers spin around, are supposed to whip the paint off. All these pseudo-tools do is gouge up the wood; then, the metal fingers go flying off—usually toward your eyes.

Power grinders, auto body shop type. They're heavy and noisy, and they chew circles out of the wood siding.

Thick, Alligatored Paint

If your stripping job only involves scraping off loose and peeling paint, you're lucky. More often than not, you'll have to deal with thick alligatored paint. After a number of recoatings, paint builds up to a critical thickness at which it just starts to fall off. Alligatored paint is typically just at the threshold of falling off in chunks. If you paint over it, the whole paint job could fall right down to the substrate within months. So the right way to deal with alligatored paint is to strip it down to the substrate and start over. You can do this best with an electric heat plate or heatgun.

The electric heat plate. It's a simple tool, essentially a heating element under a metal shield, all hooked to a handle. Hyde makes a good one, Sears makes one, and there are several others on the market. They cost $30 to $50. All of them work the same way: You hold the plate over the paint until the paint starts to smoke, then you scrape away about a square foot of hot, bubbling paint with a 6-inch scraping knife. Typically, one pass takes off paint all the way down to the substrate. This is a great tool for removing paint from flat surfaces, such as exterior siding.

The electric heat gun. It's like an industrial-strength hair dryer. Ten years ago, these tools were hard to find. They were only used to heat up heat-shrink for bubbly packaging and electronic wiring. Then renovators found out they could be used to strip paint, loosen up old floor tile adhesive, and thaw frozen pipes. Now there are lots of them on the market. The best ones have metal cases and replaceable heating elements. The elements *will* break if you drop the gun while it's hot. Top quality guns go for $60 to $80. Plastic guns with non-replaceable elements go for as little as $20. Heat guns are great for fluted columns, column capitals, mouldings, or anything with an irregular surface. They heat up about a 3-inch diameter circle of paint, which can be scraped away with a knife. Work goes more slowly than with a heat plate, but a heat plate doesn't work well on irregular surfaces.

I don't, however, like using blowtorches and sandblasters, for removing thick coats of paint.

Blowtorches. They usually char the wood so it won't take new paint properly. They volatilize the lead in lead paint, creating lead vapors that a dust mask won't keep out. And they've set more than a few houses on fire.

Sandblasters. Sandblasting chews out the soft grain of siding, rounds off corners, exposes nailheads, and generally ages a building about a hundred years. On masonry surfaces, sandblasting tears up mortar joints, knocks the protective outer surface off bricks, and accelerates moisture damage by exposing more surface area.

Chemical Stripping

In some cases, particularly on masonry buildings or on metal parts of buildings (roofs, window surrounds), chemical paint stripping is the way to go. Heat methods don't work so well on masonry, because the masonry acts as a heat sink, drawing heat away from the paint and keeping the temperature too low to break the paint bond. Metal surfaces also act as heat sinks, and they can conduct heat to framing underneath, creating a tire hazard. Coated metal surfaces such as terne or galvanized have a protective coating that would likely be damaged by mechanical removal methods.

Chemical paint stripping of a whole building (or of large parts of a building) is best left to experienced specialty contractors. ProSoCo (PO Box 1578, Kansas City, KS 66101; 913/281-2700) is one company that sells chemical strippers and cleaners to contractors, architects, and building owners who are undertaking whole-building stripping or cleaning projects (see this column, 2/87).

When *Not* to Strip

One bit of advice about when *not* to strip a building: Even though a lot of people are eager to strip brick buildings and reveal the "natural beauty" of the brick, painted brick buildings should usually stay painted. You can make a client unhappy pretty quickly by stripping a brick building, only to expose mismatched brick and mortar joints. And with a lot of old painted brick buildings, that's just what you'd find. Brick buildings were often painted to cover up patches, and sloppy additions and repairs. Unless you know the brick will look good stripped, or unless the building owner is prepared to pay to make any "surprises" look good after the building is stripped, it's probably best to leave the building a1one. ■

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