

# Beadboard

If you know how to handle a few tricky spots, this elegant detail can be a snap to install

BY RICK ARNOLD

I love to transform a room with wainscot. My favorite type and the easiest to install is beadboard. Whether in a Victorian house with stained-beadboard panels or in a cottage with painted beadboard, a room can morph from blah to beautiful quickly (photo right). By matching trim details such as the cap (chair rail) and baseboard with the rest of the millwork (casing, crown), wainscot can enhance the whole style.

For this project, I installed paint-grade tongue-and-groove beadboard planks, which are the best type I've worked with (sidebar p. 53). These ½-in.-thick preprimed boards, made from engineered lumber, have a finished width of about 3 in. After the first board is secured, the rest are mostly self-supporting, so whole walls can be dry-fit. And because baseboard hides the bottom ends of the boards in most cases, installation goes quickly, and I have to pay attention only to critical areas. □

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# Wainscot

## FORGIVING INSTALLATION

*Bullnose and cove molding finish the top of the beadboard.*

*Beadboard*

*Baseboard molding covers bottom edge of beadboard.*

To complement the colonial trim in this house, the wainscot cap is a simple bullnose, which rests on top of the beadboard and is supported by a  $\frac{3}{4}$ -in. cove molding. A standard  $3\frac{1}{2}$ -in. colonial base covers the bottom edges of the beadboard and returns at the edge of the casing.

### ENGINEERED LUMBER

For paint-grade beadboard, engineered lumber has all the benefits of both regular wood and medium-density fiberboard (MDF) stock. It has the feel, workability, and look of standard lumber, but it enjoys the stability of MDF. Also, its dimensional measurements stay consistent from one board to the next. On this project, I used WindsorONE SPBC4 beadboard ([www.windsorone.com](http://www.windsorone.com); 707-838-7101).

## BEADBOARD BASICS



### A guide strip keeps the top straight

Start by snapping a level chalkline around the room to indicate the top of the beadboard (usually about 35 in. from the floor). Then tack on a temporary straightedge with small brads. Keeping the top of the beadboard in a straight line provides an even edge for the cap to rest on.

I like to glue beadboard to a clean substrate, so with existing drywall, I cut an inch or so below the top of the future wainscot cap and remove the drywall from there down. In older houses where removing lath and plaster would be messy and impractical, I clean the area as best as possible and make sure to attach the beadboard to the plaster with polyurethane glue.

**TIP:** Make clear marks on the plywood to pinpoint nailing hazards behind the wall, such as plumbing feeds or wires.

### Start plumb and stay plumb



Tack the first board in place, and check it with a level to make sure it's plumb. If need be, plane the board on the casing side until the leading edge is plumb. Then check every couple of feet to make sure that the beadboard is staying plumb. You can correct for plumb in the field by opening a slight gap between two boards at the top or bottom.

### Nail where it won't show



**TIP:** If a correction of  $\frac{1}{8}$  in. or more is required, spread it out over a few boards.

In place of nailing along the length of the boards, run horizontal beads of construction adhesive about 16 in. apart on the plywood. Then face-nail the top and bottom of each board where trim will hide the nails.

# FIT AROUND WINDOWS

Before running the beadboard, I put in the casing and the stool (without returns) around each window. But I leave the apron off until after the beadboard is installed.

The ability to dry-fit tongue-and-groove beadboard is a real plus when installing it



Scribe guide

Tongue removed

around a window. To get precise cutlines around window casing and other obstacles, I make a scribe guide by ripping the tongue off a length of beadboard. This gives me the exact finished width of a board. Each side of the window receives slightly different treatment depending on the direction I run the beadboard.

## APPROACH SIDE OF THE WINDOW

Scribe the vertical line...



First, dry-fit the last full board before the window casing. Then, placing the scribe guide tight against the casing, trace the cutline on the dry-fit board.

...then the horizontal line



Holding the scribe guide against the bottom of the stool, mark the horizontal cut on the dry-fit board. The actual cut should be made about 1/8 in. below that line.

Slip in a sliver



Install the scribed board against the window casing first, then slide the last full board into place from the top down.

## EXIT SIDE OF THE WINDOW

Scribe the lines



On the other side of the window, dry-fit an extra board under the window to space a full board properly for the scribe. Then use the scribe guide as before to mark the vertical and horizontal cutlines.

After removing the extra dry-fit board, fasten the scribed board into position. Now you're ready to continue down the wall.

Scribed board completes wrap



## ELECTRICAL BOXES: TWO WAYS TO MEASURE

The electrical code prohibits any combustible material, such as wooden beadboard, from being inside the area of an electrical box. When beadboard is installed after the electrical boxes, a box extension (photo right) must be put in to avoid a code violation.



For electrical boxes that share a seam between boards



Simply dry-fit the first board, then mark and cut it accordingly. Once both sides are cut and checked for fit, fasten them to the wall.

For a box that falls within a single board



Mark the top and bottom on the plywood, then transfer the marks to the dry-fit board. Measure from the adjacent board for the vertical cuts.

## FOLDED FINISH IN A CORNER

I don't bother to fit the corner board precisely for the first wall because the edge is covered by the corner board from the other wall. To make sure that I don't end up with a narrow sliver in the corner, I take a quick measurement of the wall. If need be, I start with a half-piece instead of a full board.

A smart start



Narrow slivers of beadboard are difficult to install in a corner. To avoid them, a quick overall measurement will tell you whether to start at the casing with a full board or to rip the first board in half.

Dry-fit for a perfect corner



After dry-fitting the last full-width board, push the scribe guide hard into the corner and draw the cut-line. Then cut the scribed board to become the final corner piece.

Accordion fit



To complete the corner, pull the shared edge of the last full board and the scribed board out from the wall, seating their outside edges in place. Then spring the boards into place.

## Other material choices for beadboard

Over the years, I have installed different types of beadboard. Some worked better in certain situations than others, and some I just should have avoided. A general rule of thumb is that the thinner the stock, the shallower the beaded profile. Shallower profiles fill with paint, and their shadowlines don't look nearly as nice as deeper beads milled in thicker stock.

### MDF SHEETS

Medium-density fiberboard (MDF) sheet-stock beadboard comes pre-primed in 4-ft. widths. Take extra care to seal cut ends when installing it in moisture-prone areas such as bathrooms.

### MDF PLANKS

Preprimed MDF planks are available in certain areas of the country and usually come either two beads or four beads wide. As with MDF sheet stock, I avoid using these planks in high-moisture areas, and I prime all cuts to keep the boards from absorbing moisture.

### WOOD PLANKS

Beadboard planks are available in different wood species. Typical thicknesses are  $\frac{1}{4}$  in.,  $\frac{1}{2}$  in., or  $\frac{3}{4}$  in., with finished widths of 3 in. or 5 in. Planks come with a primed or natural finish. Solid wood shrinks and swells in response to humidity changes, and unfinished pine beadboard is the worst; it never seems to stop moving. To minimize moisture absorption and wood movement, I stain or paint the boards before I install them.

### PLYWOOD SHEETS

Usually  $\frac{1}{4}$  in. thick, 4-ft.-wide plywood beadboard can be stained or painted. However, I've seen it split along a grain line and across bead lines occasionally, so it should be handled with care.