

Path to a Perfect Paint Job

High-quality exterior painting depends on flawless prep and application

BY BROOKE CAMBRIDGE

When it comes to exterior painting, mistakes mean future appearance or performance problems, and nine times out of 10, the mistakes are made before the painting even starts. I've learned in my 20 years of painting that there are always new things to learn. Fortunately, my participation in a local pro-painter network and the national Painters Contracting Association (PCA) help keep me and my team up to date on procedures and problem prevention. One of the recurring themes I hear at meetings and from trade publications is that if you put sufficient effort into preparing for a paint job, the work your client often doesn't see will pay dividends with an easier and longer-lasting paint job.

I've been painting exteriors in Boston for 20 years and now own my own painting company, BLC Painting. One of the ways I ensure quality is with a comprehensive approach to

paint prep. While there are dozens of tools we use in our line of work as painters, one of the most effective has been our standard operating procedure checklist (see sidebar, p. 35). This checklist has proved helpful in getting a typical exterior paint job done right, every time.

Watch the weather

Waiting for the right conditions before you start priming and painting is critical. Paint failure is most often caused by not giving enough time for drying, which includes considering the weather. You'll want to avoid temperatures below 50°F and above 80°F. Too cold, and condensation will start to form on the top layer. Too hot, and the paint will dry too quickly. Even in the right temperature, you'll want to pay attention to the sun. If you paint in direct sunlight, the top surface of the paint can dry prematurely, leading to blistering and bubbling. If you rush, you may

have to fix spots, or even redo everything at your expense.

While there's no set rule of thumb when it comes to deciding where on a house to start first with exterior painting, I do have a personal preference. With my team, I like to set up on one side and scrape it all down. Then we clean up and move half the crew to the back side to start that same process. Two people stay and power-wash the side we just scraped, and we move around the house like that. This leaves more time for drying and is most efficient to keep the job moving.

Stepping back to admire your work is said to be the best part of the job, but even better is when you see your clients looking at their newly painted home and showing the same satisfaction. □

Brooke Cambridge is the owner of BLC Painting in Salem, Mass. Photos by Patrick McCombe, except where noted.

STEP 1 PROTECT AND COVER

One of the most important steps is to protect and cover anything not being painted. Drop cloths and masking not only prevent damage, they help you look organized and professional to clients and neighbors.



LADDER PLACEMENT
Our procedures follow OSHA's 4-to-1 rule: With every 4 ft. of height, the ladder is extended 1 ft. away from the house.

GUTTERS AND DOWNSPOUTS
Removing downspouts makes painting easier, but most homeowners don't want to add to the scope of the project, so we mask them.



EXTERIOR LIGHTS

When possible we'll ask homeowners remove lights, but when that's not an option we thoroughly mask them with painter's plastic and tape.



WINDOW UNITS

If window air conditioners can't be removed, we mask and unmask them every day so they're usable when we're not on-site.



PLANTS AND HARDSCAPING

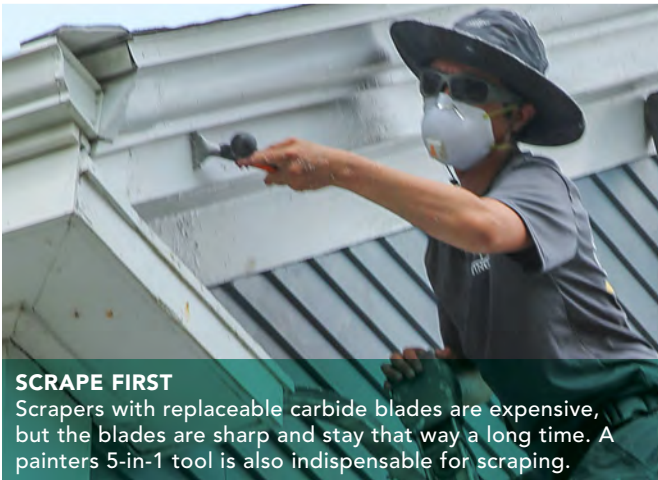
We cover decks, walks, and walls with drop cloths or plastic. Use only light drop cloths to cover plants, because it gets hot enough under plastic to kill foliage.

LEAD PAINT WARNING

If your home was built before 1978, there's a pretty good chance of it having lead-based paint. Lead paint is a neurotoxin and should be managed with care. Assume the existing paint on older homes has lead, or have it tested by a lead specialist or qualified laboratory. We have OSHA training for safely managing lead paint.

STEP 2 SCRAPE AND SAND

Although some painters go straight for the pressure washer, you should first scrape off all loose, peeling, or bubbled paint with a carbide scraper, which will prevent you from blowing paint chips all over the lawn. After scraping, we sand all the scraped areas.



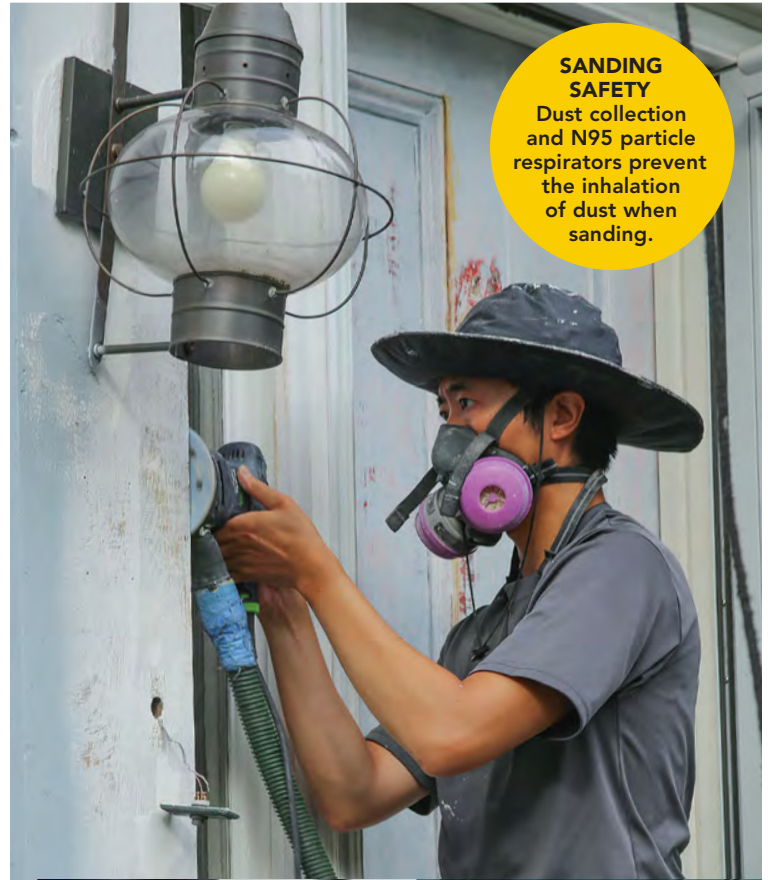
SCRAPE FIRST

Scrapers with replaceable carbide blades are expensive, but the blades are sharp and stay that way a long time. A painter's 5-in-1 tool is also indispensable for scraping.



CLEAN OFTEN

Make sure places where chips may fall are covered with drop cloths or plastic. Vacuum up chips regularly with a HEPA vac to prevent any mess from being tracked around the property or blown around by the wind.



SANDING SAFETY
Dust collection and N95 particle respirators prevent the inhalation of dust when sanding.



SAND NEXT

We typically sand scraped and rough areas with 220-grit or 150-grit paper. We connect our random-orbit sanders to a Festool vac with HEPA filter to eliminate dust. When sanding, apply even pressure and sand with the grain. Sand paint edges surrounding bare wood. (If lead paint is present, take precautions when scraping and do not sand at all.)

STEP 3 WASH AWAY DIRT

Now it's time to address the mold, mildew, and dirt that's collected over the years, but not every house will get the same washing treatment. We generally pressure-wash with a solution made from 1 cup of bleach to 5 gal. of water. We use bleach and TSP (trisodium phosphate) if a house is very dirty or to de-gloss old paint. For clients who prefer a greener product, we use Wicked Strong All-Purpose cleaner, which is phosphate-free. We use gas pressure washers so we don't trip our clients' breakers. When pressure-washing, closer is not better. We stand back several feet and stick with green and white spray nozzles, which provide a softer wash, to prevent damage to the home's exterior.



WET LANDSCAPING

Before pressure-washing over landscape plantings, we thoroughly wet their leaves with water, which prevents the cleaning agents from harming the plants.



CAULK GAPS

We use quick-drying exterior latex caulking to fill any gaps between the siding and window casings and between the pieces of lap siding. We also seal any small cracks in the siding itself. We tool the joints with a wet finger and carry rags to wipe our smoothing finger and to clean up any excess. It makes for a cleaner job if you reposition ladders often so you can stand in the right position for effective smoothing.

STEP 4 FILL HOLES AND GAPS

Caulking around trim and windows and doors helps keep out water, and nicely tooled caulk joints look better than open gaps. We replace caulking that is cracked and fill scratches and small holes with one-part latex wood filler. Larger holes are filled with two-part Bondo.



FILL HOLES

We use a putty knife to fill large and especially deep areas with two-part Bondo Wood Filler because it dries faster than one-part products. For smaller areas like pet scratches and nail holes, we use a one-part latex exterior filler which dries in an hour or two. After filling, we sand with 150-grit and then 220-grit paper before priming.



CLEAN THOROUGHLY

We work from extension ladders and stand back at least 5 ft., washing from the top down to prevent water from getting behind the siding and dirt from above from washing down onto previously cleaned sections. We don't spray at windows, because most won't fully keep out the stream of water. If we're painting sashes, we wash them by hand with soft RV brushes.



CHECK THE MOISTURE CONTENT

After pressure-washing, you'll have to wait one to three days without rain or major temperature drops before priming. Don't guess at whether the siding is dry enough. Instead, use a moisture meter to test the materials. Paint shouldn't be applied above 17% moisture content because it has a greater chance of peeling or bubbling.

STEP 5 PLAN TO SPRAY OR BRUSH

Spraying provides a nice even coat and it takes half the time of brushing, but the ability to spray depends on what's around you and the weather. Brushing and rolling are preferred for small areas that take too long to mask and when neighboring structures or cars can't be protected from overspray.

SPRAY IN TEAMS

When spraying, you have to move fast. We set up pairs of ladders so painters can hand off the sprayers to each other from the ladders they set up and leveled earlier. After the handoff, the first painter repositions his or her ladder for a second handoff. The idea is to spray 3-ft.- to 4-ft.-wide bands of primer or paint across the width of the house and then reset lower down. Triple-check that everything is ready to go before spraying.

SAFE SPRAYING
When spraying, make sure to wear an appropriate respirator based on the coating.



STEP 6 TIME TO PRIME

It's best to prime the whole house versus spot-priming damaged areas, because the primer helps the paint stick and cover the substrate. We generally tint primer to the exact color of the top coat and we use oil because it seems to adhere better than water-based primer in our coastal New England climate.

TEST THE SPRAY

Make passes on cardboard before spraying the house to dial in the right pressure (see "Don't be Afraid to Spray," *FHB* #259). Check the coating manufacturer's instructions for application help.



BRUSHES AND ROLLERS GO TO WORK FAST

For trim and small sections of siding, it's often faster to brush or roll, because less masking and surface protection is needed for brushing when you have skilled painters. We like mini rollers, which allow you to paint close to trim, at the bottom of lap siding, and in other tight corners. My favorite brush for latex and oil paint and primers is a 2½-in.-wide Chinex bristle brush from Corona. My favorite brush for oil-only is a Corona natural China bristle.



PRIME THE FIELD

Spraying makes priming and painting go much faster, but wait for non-windy days so overspray won't be carried to neighboring cars or properties.

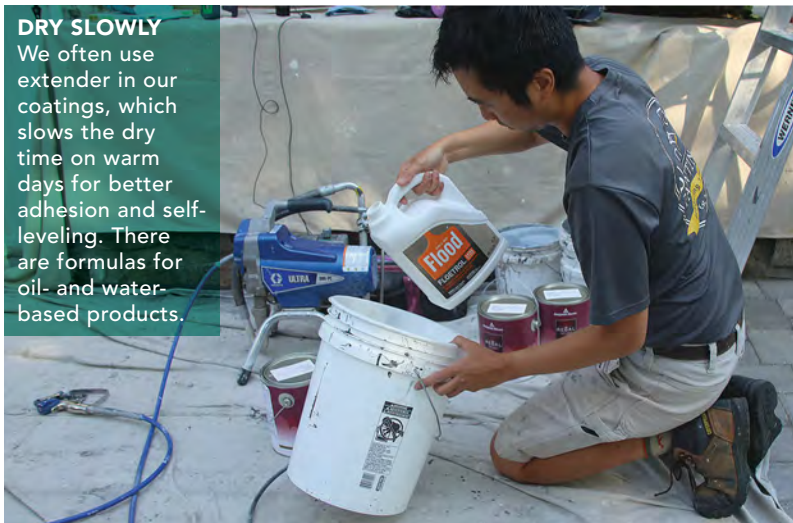
STEP 7 TIME TO TOPCOAT

Modern acrylic latex paint is our preferred topcoat for most projects. Latex is more elastic, which prevents cracks that come with changes in temperature, and more vapor-permeable, which prevents peeling.



PAINT THE TRIM

We spray the field, but we paint the trim using mini rollers after cutting in with a brush.



DRY SLOWLY

We often use extender in our coatings, which slows the dry time on warm days for better adhesion and self-leveling. There are formulas for oil- and water-based products.



COAT THE FIELD

Because we tint the primer to exactly match the paint color, the topcoat covers in one coat. This assumes you're using high-quality paint and the sprayer is set up correctly.

Exterior painting, step by step

A quality paint job depends on tackling all of the project tasks in the right order. Here's the checklist I give to our employees so they don't miss a step.

PREP

- 1 Greet homeowners and introduce yourself
- 2 Set up yard sign; verify scope, colors, and finishes and create project plan; set up GoPro
- 3 Check for and document previous damages to surfaces
- 4 Label paint cans
- 5 Unload extension ladders
- 6 Set up shop area; establish staging area by trailer if possible
- 7 Protect workspace from paint chips/spatter with drop cloths and masking
- 8 Remove downspouts/fixtures (per scope) and place in labeled baggies
- 9 Set up ladders
- 10 Scrape loose paint thoroughly wearing all PPE
- 11 Drop paint chips in trash bags and vac all areas clean; remove masking and coverings
- 12 Set up pressure washer with cleaning solution mix; wash needed areas from top down
- 13 Allow proper dry time
- 14 Protect and cover work area with drop cloths and masking
- 15 Light-sand rough areas with 150-grit sandpaper by hand (Do not power-sand lead)
- 16 Apply one spot coat or full oil prime to seal wood (per scope), trim then body

PAINT

- 18 Patch, fill, and repair as needed
- 19 Apply caulking to gaps and cracks to seal from moisture and apply glazing
- 20 Light-sand rough surfaces as needed
- 21 Set up paint kits; mask surfaces to protect from overspray; cover rooflines
- 22 Spray or hand-tool one to two finish coats as the job requires to ensure that the house is covered (use left-right, top-down method to ensure you keep a wet edge and prevent the paint from flashing)

DO NOT GET INTO PAINT UNTIL 100% OF PREP WORK IS COMPLETED

CLEAN

- 23 Allow proper dry time between coats (reference paint cans as needed)
- 25 Clean roller kits, brushes, and spray equipment
- 26 Return tools to designated area in trailer—keep them organized
- 27 Place trash bags in appropriate client trash bins
- 28 Leave property in as good or better condition than when we arrived
- 29 Replace fixtures, downspouts, and hardware
- 30 Complete detailed job-site walk through to confirm perfection
- 31 Thank the client by name