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PAINTING YOUR HOME? Should you get the lowest estimate?

Painting your house may seem like something almost anyone can do. You can easily buy the paint and the tools; you can watch videos online that tell you exactly how to do it; you can take DIY classes on painting techniques at home improvement stores.

But paint and equipment can be expensive, and for big jobs you may have to rent special equipment to get good results. Painting contractors also tell us that where do-it-yourselfers tend to fall down on the job is in lack of proper preparation before painting. You can't just plaster your stucco walls with paint without cleaning all surfaces first. DIY painters also tend to use rollers only, instead of sprayers. As a result, they may not have the strength to do two coats of paint as contractors will often do.

And what about going up extra-tall ladders to do the fascia under your eaves outside or the 10- to 12-foot interior ceilings inside many houses in Arizona? Are you afraid of heights?

For those reasons and more, **hiring a professional and experienced painting contractor is well worth the expense** and will give you a lasting paint job that will look great for up to 10 years, even on your exterior, instead of three to five.

What a good contractor does on an exterior paint job

Most homeowners tend to hire a painter for exterior work because that's the part of the house seen by the public at-large. They don't want the neighbors – or the homeowners association – complaining about their sloppy work.

When you hire a competent contractor, you will find out the biggest part of the job is the preparation before painting. On an average-sized home, painters will spend 50 percent of their time and sometimes more preparing, patching and repairing before painting.

Prep work can include filling fine cracks in stucco with elastomeric caulk or putting stucco patches on damaged spots. All penetrations through stucco need to be caulked as well as areas where stucco touches wood, metal and masonry. Windows and door trim should be caulked. Professionals use paintable elastomeric for this work. Wooden areas under the eaves should be scraped and primed.

Stucco walls must be pressure-washed to remove dirt, loose or peeling paint, and chalkiness caused by paint oxidizing or deteriorating in the sun.

During painting, your walls will be sprayed with paint and back-rolled with more paint to really push the paint into the pores of the stucco. The rougher your stucco is, the more paint that will have to be applied. Some contractors will spray a second time.

On exteriors, be sure your contractor uses 100 percent acrylic resin exterior paint. Remember, that a 4 mil thick coat of paint on your walls is the only thing protecting your house from sun and rain! With such a thin layer of protection you need to know you have the right paint and it's been applied correctly. There isn't much margin for error.

Be sure the paint comes from a company with a sun-proof line containing UV inhibitors and additives to fight mildew and fungus. Some paints also have packages that repel insects and rodents. Premium paint will resist cracking, peeling and blistering and will carry a manufacturer's warranty.

Most paint companies offer different grades of paint – falling into the categories of good, better and best. Do a little advance research at a paint store about this, because choosing premium paint is a necessity. Don't cut corners; cheaper paint may use cheaper resins and pigments.

The cost of paint will only make up about 15 to 25 percent of what your job costs inside or outside of your home; most cost is in the contractor's labor. Some contractors might give you a slight discount if you dig back the gravel that lies against your house or take off your shade screens yourself. You may have to cut back shrubs and plants as well before the painter can do your walls.

What a good contractor does on an interior job

Many homeowners think that they can paint the inside of their homes, but even if they choose the right paint, they don't apply it properly. They don't let it dry completely before applying another coat, and they don't cover their walls thoroughly enough. They also underestimate the challenge involved in painting straight lines between areas with different colors or in painting archways and niches, for example.

The contractor you hire should be skilled at all these jobs as well as handling the tough tasks in painting doors, jambs and baseboards. If you can see brush strokes on your walls after the paint dries, you need to complain. Good paint, a good brush and a great painter won't let that happen. Painting "holidays" – areas where a previous coat of paint shows through – should also be corrected.

If you want to have special touches like faux painting or glazes, hiring a contractor is far less risky than doing it yourself. Homeowners who try this type of work using kits bought from home improvement stores can sometimes be disappointed with the results.

An experienced contractor specializing in faux work and glazing can even help match the colors in a piece of furniture or a picture in a magazine. The contractor should be willing to generate sample areas on your walls until the results satisfy you.

Just as with exteriors, choose the highest quality paint for your interior walls and you'll be a lot happier with the job.

Types of paint used inside your home vary depending on their level of gloss. Generally, the glossier that the paint is, the easier it is to keep clean and the more moisture resistant it will be. But high-gloss paint is not popular in homes.

Most common finishes for paint include:

Eggshell or satin enamel – Good for use in the living areas and bedrooms of a home, particularly with children and pets in residence.

Semi-gloss – Good for bathrooms and laundry rooms, places where you need paint that is moisture-resistant. You'll want semi-gloss on your doors, door-frames and baseboards inside the house.

Flat – Often used by builders of new houses throughout the house, but it's not washable and can rub off when you try to clean up stains.

Here are tips on finding and hiring a painting contractor:

- One of the best ways of finding a contractor is through recommendations -- from friends, acquaintances or relatives or a trustworthy referral system. You can also get names of painters from a local paint store.
- Only talk to contractors who are licensed, bonded and insured. According to some painting experts, that can easily weed out 60 percent of the painters in the marketplace. Too many painters with poor qualifications get into the business temporarily during tough economic times. So verify the licensing status of your potential contractors on the Arizona Registrar of Contractors Web site (azroc.gov). Check them out with the Better Business Bureau as well.
- Once you have three contractors, ask them to come up with the parameters of your job beforehand. Have all of them bid the job in the same way. Get recommendations from them on what paint to use and what colors. You don't want one using top quality paint and one using inferior paint.
- Always ask for written references or phone numbers of recent customers to contact about a painter's work. It's good to get references from customers from a couple of years ago as well because that indicates that your contractor has been in business for a while. A minimum of five years is best.
- You may want to visit the references even if you're just driving by to see the exterior of a recently painted home. With faux finishes and glazes, it's good to pay a visit to see the quality of the work and whether you think it will fit your home or not. Go see a job that is three to five years old and you'll know if your painter's work can stand the test of time!

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