

# Shower-Door

Sliding, swinging, or bifold,  
we review your choices

BY MATTHEW TEAGUE

More often than not, the shower door is the first thing you notice when you walk into a bathroom. Unfortunately, this first thing you see is most often the last thing considered in a bathroom's design. Choosing a shower door might not be the first design decision made, but its prominence within the space demands that it ought not be left for last. Whatever type of shower you have—a simple tub enclosure or an expansive tiled-in shower room—there are numerous ways to contain shower overspray, and it pays to explore all the options.

Ten years ago, the bulk of the market consisted of premade stock doors, many of them sliders. However, the market has shifted, and the attention on custom designs is greater than ever. Manufacturers have responded by creating efficient production methods,

## SLIDING DOORS

Don't let memories of a rickety 1960s slider—which was prone to leaking, jamming, and jumping out of its tracks—scare you off. New models, like Basco's 3400 unit (photo left), not only work smoothly but also come in a wide range of styles with endless glass options. Units range from those with one fixed door and one sliding door to those with multiple sliding doors, which allow a wider entryway to the shower. While sliders are still used mostly on tub/shower combinations, newer models, like MTI's Teutonic (photo facing page), look great on stand-alone shower stalls.

Traditionally, sliders are framed units, but newer models come in sleek semiframeless designs. Sliders referred to as "frameless" typically describe only the panels; there has to be some kind of structure to hold the door in place. Most "frameless" sliders have top and side frames of some kind, even if they're minimal. Thicker and heavier glass requires more substantial framework. The top of the door is usually guided with rollers or bearings that are hidden seamlessly in the frame. The clunky lower tracks of old, which filled with water and soap scum over time, are no longer an issue. Lower tracks require only a small channel outfitted with a center guide to keep the panels moving on the correct plane.

**A sliding door for the modern bath.** This shower door, made by Basco, represents the custom appeal of a factory-made door that has a relatively low price tag. The sleek frame, with an oil-rubbed bronze finish, holds  $\frac{3}{16}$ -in.-thick glass. The door costs roughly \$550 (as shown).

# Sampler

which demand a lead time as short as five days to make a custom-looking piece without the custom price tag. What this means for you is a greater selection of doors to choose from, but also a more complex decision-making process. Here, I'll save you some of the trouble and explore the most popular door options, their strengths, their weaknesses, general costs, and caveats.

## Select an operating style that fits the bathroom layout

While sliding and swinging doors are the most common styles, bifold, curved, and neo-angle designs also have their place. Armed with the footprint of the shower and the height requirements, your first step is to figure out what type of operating style suits your bathroom best. In general, the larger the shower, the more enclosure options

you'll have. In small bathrooms, you'll be limited to doors that need little space when they're opened and closed.

## Shower doors may vary, but materials don't

No matter what type of door you choose, you'll find that they're all constructed of similar materials. Shower doors and surrounds are made of some type of safety "glass"—plastic, glass, or a combination of the two. (See "What's the Difference?" p. 32.) Plastic is the least expensive "glass" option, but it comes at a cost. Plastic is easily scratched, and it tends to display wear and tear much more prominently than true glass.

Although there's no industry standard, shower doors range in thickness from  $\frac{3}{16}$  in. up to  $\frac{1}{2}$  in. Thick glass panels offer a more substantial look and evoke a greater sense of quality, especially in frameless designs. However,

**Subtle, but suitable.** In the past decade, shower doors with clear or slightly obscure glass have been homeowners' leading choice, representing about 95% of the market.

## What to look for

Avoid doors with multiple grooves on the lower track. Although most tracks have weep holes, the potential for water collection exists if the holes are not at the lowest point of the track. Smooth surfaces where water runs directly back into the basin are best; they're easier to keep clean. Make sure the door you choose comes with or allows you to attach towel bars where you want them—outside the shower, inside the shower, or both.

## Installation notes

The installation of most sliding units can be DIY as long as you've got enough helping hands to manage the weight of the door. Be sure to check the opening for square before you choose a unit, and make sure the framework can be adjusted easily in out-of-plumb situations. Tracks and frames that abut the walls or basin should be caulked with silicone on the outer side but left open on the inside so that water can weep back into the shower.

**Starting around \$100**



**Roll on.** The Teutonic by MTI, with its exposed barnlike rail and rollers, is nothing short of an architectural expression that turns a simple sliding door into a bathroom focal point. This shower door is outside the average price range for sliders and can cost several thousand dollars (\$3600 for a 60-in. unit).



# SWINGING DOORS

Swinging shower doors open just like the front door on your house, using either a traditional hinge or a pivot at the top and bottom of the door. The hardware on pivoting doors is usually less obtrusive, but choosing the right hinge is a good opportunity to complement or play off the fixtures and hardware in the bathroom.

Shower doors are generally 24 in. to 36 in. wide and open outward, so make sure that adjacent cabinets, toilets, or vanities won't interfere with the swing of the door. Many models also swing inward 10° to 20°, making it easier to reach in and adjust the water temperature before you step into the shower. Swinging doors are seldom a good choice for tub/shower combinations.

## What to look for

How a door closes—with a magnetic seal, a gasket, or a catch—is a matter of preference. Whenever possible, try out the shower door in person before making a purchase. Because the doors swing outward, take a close look at the method used to prevent water on the open door from dripping onto the floor. Most employ a vinyl sweep or a channel-style drip edge—they can be almost invisible—but make sure the drip edge will last the long haul or can be replaced easily. If you're tall, make sure the header (if there is one) is high enough so that you can step into the shower without ducking your head. Always remember that you get what you pay for. Cheap swinging doors are cheap for a reason.

## Installation notes

The actual installation is fairly straightforward, but measurements and pilot holes must be spot-on for the door to function as it should. Whether you do it yourself or hire an installer, make sure that out-of-plumb walls are addressed, either by having the glass cut to fit or in the mount used to tie the glass to the wall. Depending on the size of the unit and the thickness of the glass, heavier units may require extra blocking in the wall.

**Starting around \$100**



### **Frameless doors highlight hardware.**

The clean simplicity of a frameless swinging door (above) allows hardware to shine, playing off other bathroom fixtures. This door, by Kohler, costs \$820.

### **A framed door has mass that evokes strength.**

The bronze-finished frame on this swinging door adds a sense of quality and durability to the bathroom. The cost is typical of a quality door, at roughly \$1600 (as shown, including surround).

**Frameless design varies.** A door marketed as a frameless door (top right) may actually be incorporated into a framed enclosure (bottom right), drastically changing its look.

thick glass, which can increase overall costs, requires hardware engineered to handle lots of weight.

Glass can be purchased in a range of styles: clear, tinted or colored, textured or patterned, sandblasted or custom-etched. Trying to keep clear-glass doors clean, however, has scared away many buyers. In just the past few years, manufacturers have begun treating clear doors with a coating, such as Basco's Aquaglide, which works much like Rain-X to make cleaning easier and less frequent.

The frames and hardware used on shower doors are generally made of anodized aluminum, with applied finishes that match most any fixture you can buy, including brushed nickel, polished aluminum, bronze, oil-rubbed bronze, gold, and chrome. A few low-end models have acrylic frames, while metal hardware for a few high-end systems comes in brushed or plated brass, stainless steel, or powder-coated aluminum. Hinge materials range from small aluminum hinges to full-length versions in

brass or stainless steel. As you would imagine, you'll pay a premium for hardware made of brass or stainless steel.

### The best door complements the bath

Whether it's a bifold, swinging, or curved shower door, more and more homeowners are opting for frameless surrounds. While there's no functional advantage, frameless and semiframeless designs offer less distraction, leaving unobstructed views that help to highlight a sweeping cathedral ceiling or make a small bathroom seem larger. Framed shower enclosures, however, are easier to manufacture, and they are usually less fussy to install against out-of-plumb walls. Framed doors create a focal point and help to direct the eye to what's within the frame, be it an etched-glass door or a sheet of clear glass that showcases high-end fixtures or exceptional tilework.

Although there are exceptions, frameless designs are generally the more expensive type of shower door. Just



**Fixed, but functional.** Shower shields offer spray protection for both shower stalls and tub/shower combinations, and they are available in fixed and hinged designs, which increase accessibility. This shield, by Kohler, is priced at \$1900.

## Shower shields supply simple protection

Long common in Europe, shower shields lend a clean, open look that is just starting to catch on in the States. A shower screen, as the shields are sometimes called, consists of one or more panels that span about two-thirds of the width of the shower opening and contain the majority of the water. One panel is fixed to the wall, and in most cases, a partial panel is hinged to the stationary one. The hinged panel folds out of the way so that you can enter easily or swing it out of the way when you're bathing. While most shields are designed for use on tub/shower combinations, you can find models for shower stalls as well.

Because a shield won't catch all the overspray from a shower, it's not a good choice for every situation. You wouldn't want to use a shower shield, for instance, in a bathroom that has hardwood floors. Also, make sure that a little water won't ruin nearby fixtures.

**Starting around \$600**



## CURVED AND NEO-ANGLE DOORS

Although less common, curved and neo-angle shower enclosures are another great option when there's a shortage of space in the bathroom. Corner models take up as little as a 3x3 footprint. Besides saving space, the lines of both neo-angle and curved shower doors are an easy way to lend visual interest to an otherwise rectilinear design. Neo-angle enclosures typically feature two fixed side panels and a center panel that swings open on either a hinge or a pivot. Curved shower doors may open on a pivot, a hinge, or along a set of rollers that run in tracks at top and bottom—somewhat like a bypass door, except it slides with the arc of the curve. Either style can be found in framed, frameless, or semiframed designs, and with similar hardware options as sliding or swinging enclosures.



**A space-saving design.** Neo-angle glass doors make corner-shower installations possible and reduce the reliance on valuable open space in the bath. At \$625, this Kohler unit is on the lower end of the cost spectrum.

### What to look for

Because the hardware mechanisms are similar, concerns are the same as with sliding or swinging doors.

### Installation notes

When purchasing a single unit—shower with enclosure included—make sure there is an easy way (as part of the unit or with trim) to compensate for walls and floors that are out of plumb. Otherwise, you'll never get an installation as seamless as you want.

**Starting around \$300**

**Curved construction.** Curved shower doors offer the same space-saving qualities as neo-angle doors, but add quite a bit more architectural interest. Curved glass is expensive, which is reflective of the \$5000 price tag of this high-end Kohler unit.



## BIFOLD DOORS

Bifold shower doors are hinged in the middle so that, like an accordion, they fold in on each other. They are often used in small bathrooms where the space is limited, when the width of the shower opening is too tight for a traditional sliding door, or when there isn't enough room to open a swinging door. Although bifold doors have traditionally been of poor quality, better models are now made with the same materials and features as in other shower doors. They're available in framed and frameless versions, and they can be quite handsome.

### What to look for

The key to smooth action on a framed bifold door is in the guides that run in the tracks. Look for quality bearings or guides that won't wear over time. If there's a lower track, make sure it will neither trap water nor allow it to drip onto the floor.

### Installation notes

To ensure smooth operation, make sure the wall is plumb, or shim out the door to make it so. If you plan to install the door yourself, check that the mechanism or hinge holding the door to the wall can be adjusted easily.

**Starting around \$600**

**A big door that works in a small bath.** Bifold doors demand a very small footprint to operate properly, which is an asset in tiny bathrooms that are short on space. This Kohler door costs \$1500.



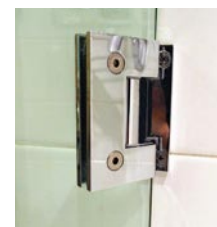
be sure to take a close look at what you're really buying. Many shower surrounds that are marketed as frameless actually have frames on everything but the shower door. Why pay for a frameless design that looks just like a framed model?

While some shower doors (framed or frameless) can be hinged directly to the wall and span the entire opening, most feature at least one stationary panel fastened to the shower wall. In these cases, hinges can be mounted to a post that runs from floor to ceiling, to the framework of adjacent glass, or directly to the glass side panel. Avoid glass-to-glass hinges that simply clamp the glass in place. Better hinges use mounting screws that run through holes drilled in the glass. Hinges may span the entire length of

the door and panel, but frameless designs usually feature only two or three small hinges. On pivoting doors, pins are attached to the top and bottom of the door and are housed in blocks. On frameless doors, the pivots are often mounted at the top and bottom of the sidelite or wall, so pivoting doors do not require a track or frame.

Side panels mount to the wall either with channel-type extrusions, with wall-mount clamps, or with wall mounts that clamp and/or screw the glass in place. High-end installations are occasionally dado-mounted into a groove in the stone or tile that covers the shower wall. □

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**Secure, through and through.** Hinges that clamp glass in place aren't as strong as those that use fasteners. A pre-drilled hole in the glass allows screws to be secured into the matching leaf.

## SOURCES

**Agalite** [www.agalite.com](http://www.agalite.com) • **American Shower Door** [www.americanshowerdoor.com](http://www.americanshowerdoor.com) • **Artistcraft** [www.artistcraft.com](http://www.artistcraft.com)

**Basco** [www.bascoshowerdoor.com](http://www.bascoshowerdoor.com) • **Century Bathworks** [www.centurybathworks.com](http://www.centurybathworks.com)

**Kohler** [www.kohler.com](http://www.kohler.com) • **MTI** [www.mtiwhirlpools.com](http://www.mtiwhirlpools.com)