



The surest way to make the  
best choice is to  
brush up on the basics

BY MISTY M. LEES

Pick  
the right •  
paint

**T**hinking of changing the color of your living room walls? You're in good company. Half of all recent home buyers repainted soon after moving in. There are other reasons as well to put on a fresh coat: an addition to the family, an addition to the house, a new couch. Painting is one of the easiest and least expensive ways to update and decorate.

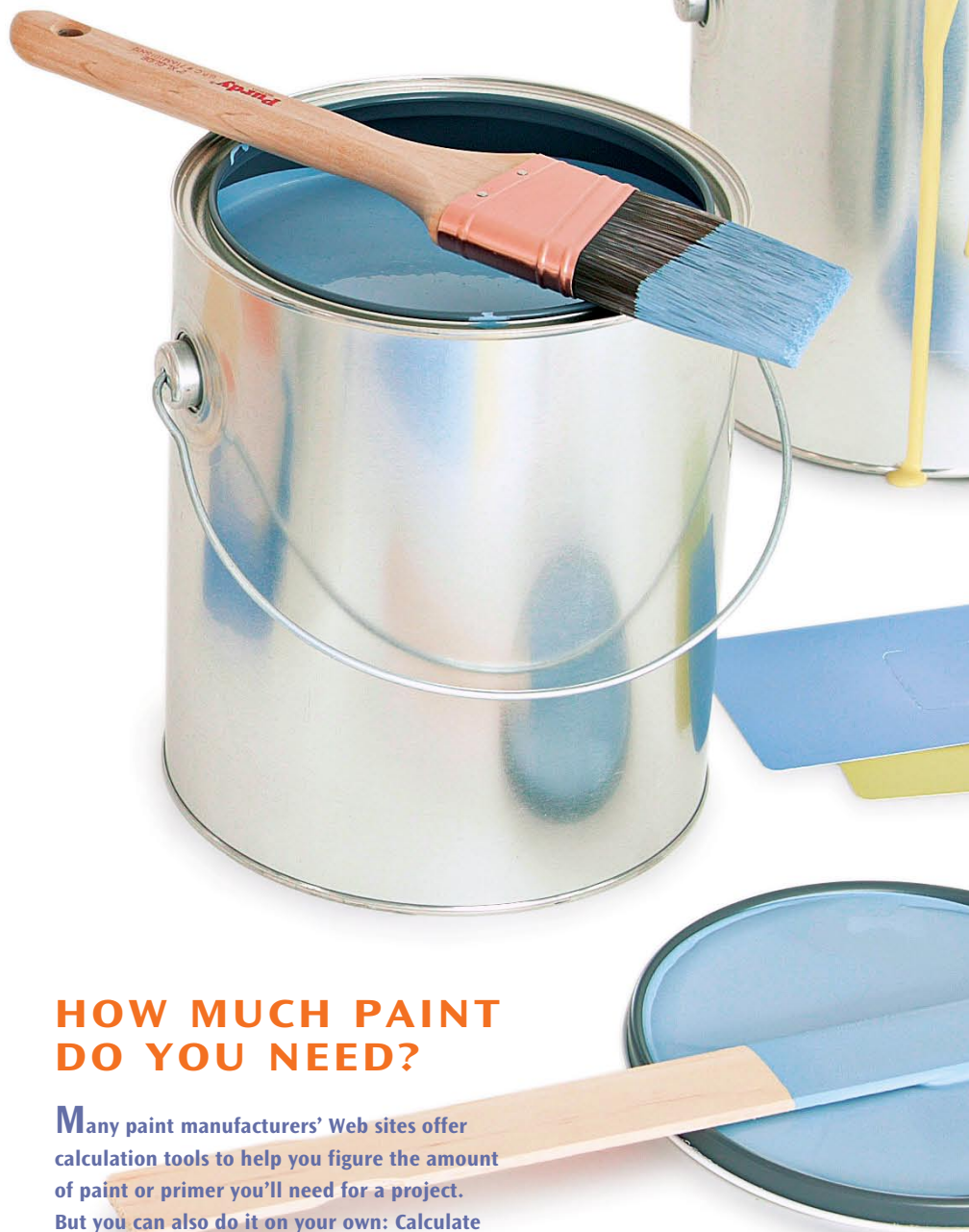
But don't just grab a can off the shelf and go at it. There's more to paint than meets the eye, and a hasty choice can leave you with poor results: paint that doesn't cover or adhere well, a color that turns ugly when the lights go down, or dirty fingerprints that don't wash off. And surface prep is more important than most homeowners realize. "We always say that [surface] preparation is 85 percent of the job," says Deb Zimmer, spokeswoman for the Paint Quality Institute. Starting off right will save you money—and time—in the end.

### What makes a high-quality paint?

No matter what paint you choose, there are three components in every can. **Pigment**, made from titanium dioxide and mineral or chemical dyes, provides color and the ability to cover or hide. **Binder**, made from acrylic latex, oils, and resins or alkyds (modified oils), makes the paint stick. The rest is **liquid** (also called the carrier or solvent), which makes the paint flow. In latex paints the liquid is water; in oil paints, mineral spirit solvents.

In both oil and latex paint, the amount of solids—pigment plus binder—is what matters. A higher volume of solids (35 to 45 percent) means the paint will dry to a thicker film and provide better coverage. A premium line will have the greatest solids content, and thus the highest price and longest warranty.

For pigment, titanium dioxide's whiteness, longevity, and covering power is unrivaled. Cheaper paints will have a greater ratio of "extender" pigments that don't work as well. As for binders, paints that are 100 percent acrylic are usually more durable and adhere better than less-expensive vinyl-acrylic paints.



### HOW MUCH PAINT DO YOU NEED?

**M**any paint manufacturers' Web sites offer calculation tools to help you figure the amount of paint or primer you'll need for a project. But you can also do it on your own: Calculate the area of each wall by multiplying the length by the height; add the walls together, and multiply that figure by the number of coats you think you'll need. To keep it simple, round up measurements to the nearest foot, and unless you have unusually large or numerous doors or windows, don't worry about subtracting them. You can find out how many cans to buy by taking your total and dividing it by the coverage indicated on the paint can label (usually 350 to 400 square feet). Buy a bit more than you'll need—just in case.



## A PRIMER ON PRIMERS

**W**hen should you use a primer? Though most homeowners would rather avoid it, the honest answer is almost always. It will make paint adhere better, look better, and last longer. And a primer is not the same as an extra coat of paint. Primers contain specialized ingredients paints don't have that enhance adhesion and provide a uniform surface for the final coat. The right primer can also fill in cracks, hide stains, prevent rust, and mask odors. The label on the can will spell out a primer's specific strengths, but here are some general guidelines:

**If you want to... Your best primer is...**

**Change wall color** A general-use acrylic-latex primer tinted to match the topcoat. For deep hues, consider a primer formulated to boost bold-color topcoats.

**Mask stains** An oil-based stain blocker will be most effective on water stains, but an acrylic-latex stain-blocking sealer will cover most blemishes.

**Eliminate odors** A pigmented shellac-based primer-sealer is the traditional choice, although some oil and some latex stain blockers are formulated to trap odors as well.

**Paint laminate, glass, or plastic** A shellac-based or specially formulated latex bonding primer can be used after sanding the surface lightly.

**Create an extra-smooth or glossy surface** A latex enamel undercoat followed by light sanding for maximum uniformity on drywall or plaster. For trim, oil-based undercoaters promote even higher gloss while penetrating and sealing the surface.

**Finish fresh drywall** A PVA or latex primer formulated for drywall. Oil-based primers can make the paper layer fuzzy.

**Paint raw wood** A general-purpose acrylic-latex or oil-based primer; use a stain-blocker on cedar or redwood.

**Paint raw metal** Two coats of rust- or corrosion-inhibiting metal primer.



Paint may also include small amounts of preservatives, mildewcides, and other agents. You can change some qualities, as the professionals do, with store-bought additives. For example, Floetrol (for latex) or Penetrol (for oil-based) will help the paint flow better and slow down the drying, minimizing brush strokes.

### The old question: oil versus latex

Oils once led in longevity and durability, but chemical improvements to latex paints have improved their performance. That, coupled with easy soap-and-water cleanup, has made latex a strong favorite. Most latex paints can be applied directly over oil, but some manufacturers recommend a primer. While water-



## A PAINT FOR EVERY SURFACE

### Ceilings

Ceiling paint is formulated thicker for less dripping and better adherence to texture. Low- or medium-sheen levels are best, as higher gloss will reflect artificial light unattractively. You can use low-luster wall paint on ceilings, but paint formulated for ceilings generally doesn't hold up well on walls.

### Walls

Choices in wall paint usually come down to the issue of luster, or gloss level (see sidebar, p. 49). Rooms where walls are subject to moisture or dirt will hold up better under a glossier paint, which is less porous than flat. But flat, or matte, types hide surface imperfections better.

### Special surfaces

Want to paint your tin ceiling, brick fireplace, iron rail, or melamine shelves? It's tempting to use leftover wall paint, but the consequence will be difficult coverage, poor adherence, and altered gloss level, so get a formula engineered for that specific surface. Some work on plastics, even glass, without prep or priming. For radiators and their covers or fireplaces, look for a paint designed to take the heat, such as Krylon Hi Heat & Radiator. And for metal, try Rustoleum brand, which offers a wide color selection of brush-on and spray paints that seal out water and prevent rust.

### Floors

Wall paint won't stand up to abuse underfoot. Select a paint specially designed for your wood, masonry, or concrete floor, and don't skip the primer. Floor paint has superior crack-filling ability, scuff-resistance, hardness, and adherence—and therefore a higher price. For stairs or other places where slipping is an issue, purchase a sandlike polypropylene additive and have the store mix it in mechanically to ensure a good blend.

### Doors and trim

Decorative details like molding are traditionally highlighted with gloss or semigloss paint. Professionals love the look of gloss, which imitates old-time lacquer. "Trim paint" generally has low porosity and high gloss. Doors, windows, cabinets, banisters, and railings also benefit from the moisture resistance and the wipe-clean benefits of gloss. If yours is an older home, be aware that high-gloss oils were especially popular on yesteryear's trim, so a primer may necessary if you plan to recoat with latex.





## THE NEWS ON HUES: COLOR MATCHING GETS EASIER

**Y**ou've found the perfect color for your living room—in a piece of fabric, a photograph, or maybe simply your mind's eye. How do you find it in a can of paint?

### Supersize the chip

Traditional color chips found in most paint stores show a wide range of color options, but they're too small to give you a feel for how the paint will look on a wall. If matching by paint chip, be sure to compare hues in the light under which they'll be viewed—you'd be surprised at what a difference it can make. Some manufacturers now offer super-size chips—up to 2 feet square—to take home. View the chip in several locations in the room under different light conditions to make sure it's the color you want.

### Let a computer decide

At many paint stores, matching an existing color is no longer a matter of squinting at a tiny paint chip held against your drapery fabric. Instead, your sample is placed under a spectrometer, a device that bounces light off it and interprets the color. The salesperson should then be able to help you come up with a paint that's close. Don't expect a flawless match, and be aware that your success can vary from store to store.

### Brush on a sample

The final—and most reliable—color test is actually putting the paint you've selected on the wall. A number of manufacturers—including Benjamin Moore and Ralph Lauren—have made this easier by introducing sample sizes of their most popular colors. If you prefer a custom color or one for which there is no sample size, buy the smallest can available and try it out. When you test, make certain to prep and prime as you would for the whole area. Pick a place for your test where you will see the color plainly. The sheen, texture, lighting, shadows, and surrounding colors will all affect your perception. View the sample in the morning, afternoon, and evening with illumination. Wait for the paint to dry fully. Some colors won't attain their final depth until completely dry.





based paints do emit chemical vapors, oils and their cleanup partners are more notorious for their irritating odors (see sidebar, right).

Today, both oil and latex paints are called “enamel.” The term, which once referred only to glossy oils that dried very hard, is ambiguous now and doesn’t indicate quality, ingredients, or even luster.

### Better technology, better paint

The addition of high-tech chemicals has improved today’s paints dramatically, says Frank Sinicrope of American Capitol Painting in Hawthorne, N.J., who’s been wielding a brush for more than 15 years. “The new longer-lasting paints have more-durable qualities and more elasticity, which inhibits the tendency to crack and peel,” he explains. Such components are hard to decipher on a label, but paints that have

them advertise lifetime warranties and slightly higher prices. “The quality of interior paint is in large part determined by how carefully and deliberately the formulator seeks to develop the product,” notes Skip Edwards, spokesman for the National Paint & Coatings Association.

So with paint, you get what you pay for. “Cost is a very good indicator and has few exceptions,” says Sinicrope. Most manufacturers offer graduated lines of paint, with quality and performance (durability, coverage, and scrubability) increasing along with the price. It’s up to you to decide the level of quality required for each job. **H**

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*For more information, see Resources, page 82.*

## ECO-SMART PAINTS

**F**or some, the smell of fresh paint signals newness—for others, it brings on headaches, watery eyes, or irritated throats. If you’re chemically sensitive or environmentally conscious, however, there’s good news. “Perhaps the most significant innovation in paint technology—one unseen by the typical consumer—is paint that helps control air pollution,” says Skip Edwards of the National Paint & Coatings Association. Homeowners can choose paints that are low-VOC, naturally biodegradable, or even recycled.

Low- and zero-VOC paints contain fewer (or none) of the noxious chemicals known as volatile organic compounds found in paint. The amount of VOCs can vary greatly, even among low-VOC types, so check the label. These paints may still contain smelly chemicals and irritants, so if you’re very sensitive, look for paints that are both low-odor and low-VOC. You can also expect less longevity and durability and a higher price.

Natural paints are made from raw ingredients such as water, plant oils and resins, plant dyes, and natural minerals. They are biodegradable, have inoffensive odors (if any), and are available in many colors. Milk paint—an ancient formula of milk protein, clay, earth pigments, and lime—is a well-known natural choice.

Recycled paints won’t alleviate paint-fume ills, but you’ll feel better about helping reuse left-over latex that would have entered the waste stream. Reprocessed and tested to meet industry standards, recycled paint is cheaper than new and usually of good quality, though it can be hard to find.

## UNDERSTANDING LUSTER

**L**uster, also called sheen or gloss, can make or break the look—and the lifespan—of wall paint. In general, the scale of lowest to highest luster goes like this: flat, matte, eggshell, satin, semigloss, high-gloss. But manufacturer-specific definitions of sheen don’t necessarily compare across the board. What one brand calls satin, another may call eggshell. So compare and choose carefully, using your own brand’s sample chips and displays.

### Glosses and satins

Wherever there is humidity or water—bathrooms, kitchens, windows, doors, mud-rooms, laundry areas—a higher gloss level is preferable. It provides a less-porous surface and greater barrier against moisture. But high gloss is too reflective for entire walls, especially where there is bright lighting or where it will highlight imperfections. A semigloss or satin (eggshell) is a better choice. Because of their “scrubbability,” these medium gloss levels are a good choice for kids’ rooms, kitchens, stairwells, and other heavily trafficked areas.

### Flat and matte finishes

With virtually no sheen, flat (also called matte) paint gives warmth in any light to sitting rooms, formal dining areas, and adult bedrooms. Painting contractor Frank Sinicrope swears by flat because it’s easy to touch up imperceptibly, and as he warns, “You will touch up, eventually.” Flat paints minimize imperfections like cracks, bumps, and brush strokes. If you prefer a darker or more intense color, a matte finish will often cover better. If you go with flat, stick to premium-line, high-solids paint, which is easier to clean than its cheaper counterparts.