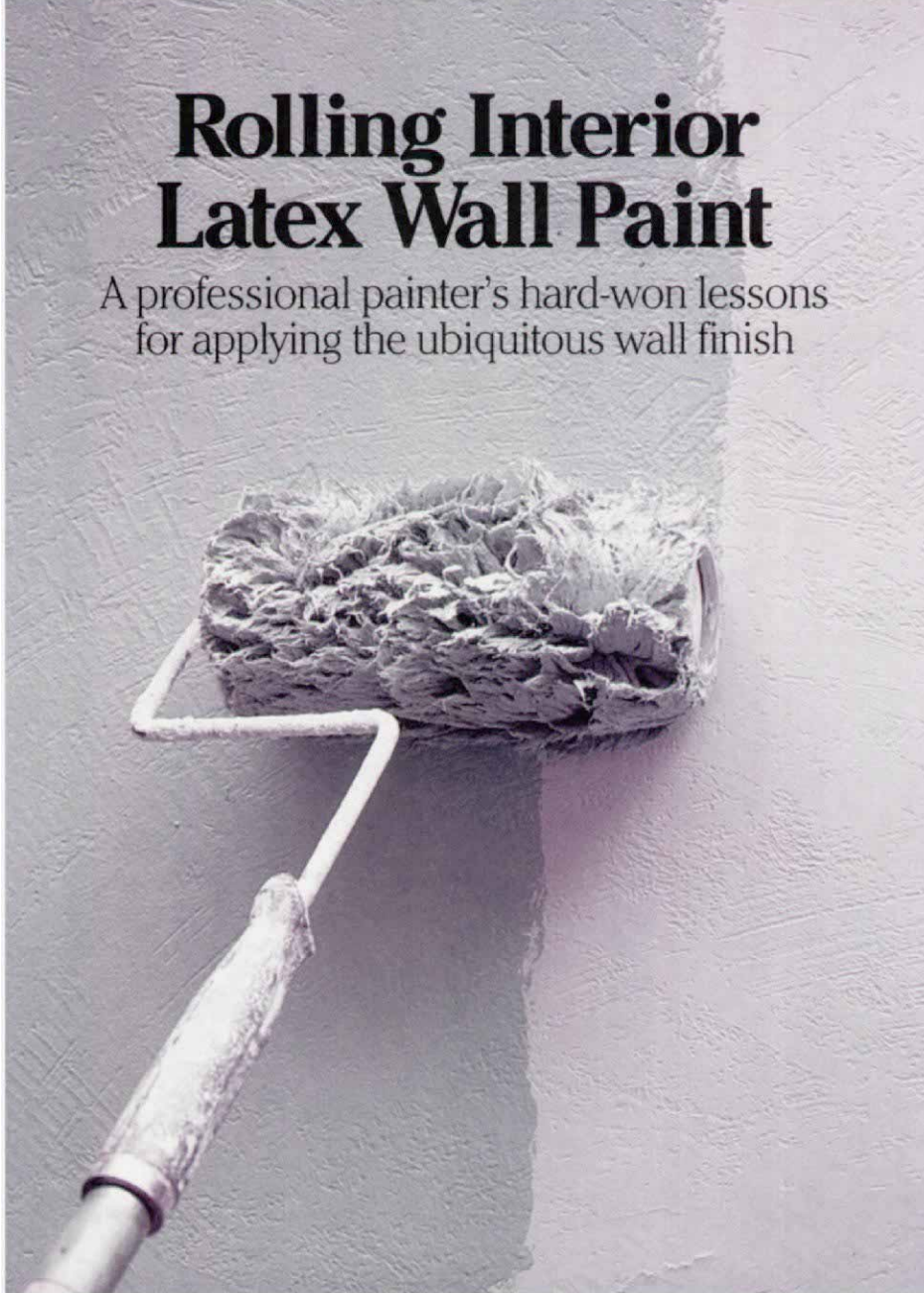


Rolling Interior Latex Wall Paint

A professional painter's hard-won lessons for applying the ubiquitous wall finish



by Byron Papa

In a typical new house, the painting sequence usually goes something like this: the drywall finisher wraps up his work, the paint crew comes in and rolls or sprays the walls and ceilings, trim carpenters do their work and the painter returns to finish the trim. As I've noted in my article on painting trim (*FHB* #42, pp. 54-59), I finish trim first and walls last, for several reasons. First of all, the pleasant velvety appearance of flat latex wall paint doesn't come without a trade-off. It's by far the most fragile of all the painter's finishes, and if the walls are painted before the trim, they can get pretty banged up by other crews. Some walls may even need repainting, especially in heavy-traffic areas like hallways.

Another reason for doing walls last is that I like to spray all my trim in place. Glossy paints, such as those applied to trim, benefit

most from spraying. And if the walls haven't been painted yet, I don't have to worry about protecting them from overspray. Granted, I have to mask the trim before painting the walls, but I use a roller to apply the wall paint, so the taping is simple because a roller doesn't cause overspray.

Health hazards—The smell of latex paint certainly isn't as overbearing as that of oil, but that doesn't necessarily mean that it's safe to breathe for extended periods. Until recently, some interior latex paints contained mercury as a fungicide. Because of its neurological toxicity to humans, mercury contained in interior latex paints was banned by the EPA as of August 20, 1990. Paints made prior to that date might still be on the shelves. Their labels list their mercury content, and if they contain

more than 200 PPM (parts per million), they should only be used outdoors.

Rolling or brushing latex paint doesn't put a significant amount of it into the air, as does spraying. As a consequence, I don't wear a respirator to roll it on, but I do use as much ventilation as possible. A window fan can help (and can dry the paint faster, too).

Textures and ceilings—Textures can liven up a room and help hide slight surface irregularities. Most walls and ceilings that I paint have been sprayed with an "orange peel" texture. Rolled, brushed or troweled-on textures can also look good under a layer of paint.

Textures should be applied right after the drywaller is finished and before the trim carpenter arrives. Textures need to be uniform, so the "applier" should be experienced and

it's best if the same person does the whole house. Unless the paint is sprayed on, even a smooth-finished wall or ceiling will have some texture resulting from the nap of the paint roller.

Textures have some disadvantages. Foremost, they make repairing holes and dents more difficult. Textures are hard to sand down if an owner eventually wants to apply wallpaper to a wall. Finally, they require more paint because the surface isn't flat.

Many of the houses I paint have ceilings that are finished with a sound-deadening texture that doesn't need painting. But if I do have to paint ceilings, I normally do them before I spray the trim. Ceilings don't get scuffed up like walls and painting them later subjects the trim to more spatter.

To spray or not to spray—It doesn't take much time to paint the average house, using a roller. Unless it's a mighty big house with a lot of exposed framing that needs painting, or if the wall texture is fragile or extremely coarse, I usually don't bother with a spray gun. I don't consider the extra setting up, masking off and cleanup time justifiable. Most of the time we're only talking about 15 gal. to 20 gal. of paint—not much of a challenge for an eager painter with a good roller.

On the occasions that I do spray, I water-thin the latex paint 10% to 15% and spray one coat each way, with wide overlaps. I use an airless system with a .017 orifice tip and a 10-in. to 12-in. spray fan (for more information on airless sprayers and tips, see *FHB* #42, pp. 54-59).

Taping off—Many painters use a brush to free-hand paint the narrow band of wall that's next to a piece of trim—it can't be accurately painted with a roller. This is called a "cut-in." I think cut-ins are okay for a wall-to-ceiling intersection. But for more visible areas, I prefer to mask off trim.

In taping off trim, you're faced with one problem right from the start: masking-tape reliability. Most brands just don't hold well enough. Even tiny leaks can show up badly, especially with contrasting colors. Some brands stick well but are difficult to remove. Others stick at first, but fail with temperature and humidity changes.

The best tapes are usually professional grades found in painting stores that cater to the trade. For the past few years I've been using Sherwin-Williams "Professional Quality" masking tape with reasonable success. Auto paint dealers usually stock very good-quality tape. But even good-quality tape can go bad if it's been stored in a hot truck for a while.

I use 1½-in. tape to mask most trim. You could get by with a narrower size, but besides sealing off the trim, the wider tape acts as an umbrella when its run horizontally (top photo, right). For crown molding, I use 1-in. tape because gravity directs most of the roller spatter away from it.

No matter how good the tape is, it has to be put down right. Most important is sealing the very edge—the first millimeter or so—between the wall and the trim. I use a small pocket

knife to stick the edge of the tape down. I shaped the tip of the blade with a metal file so that it has a gently rounded point that won't tear the tape.

I wait at least two days after painting the trim before applying any tape to it. If the trim paint is too fresh, it can discolor by reacting with the glue on the tape.

I start my taping with the baseboards, first dusting them with an old paintbrush. As I run the tape, I ride on a "roller stool" (bottom photo, right). It's a simple box, about 16 in. square and 8 in. tall, with slanted sides, a cushion and heavy-duty casters for wheels. I left one side open in which I store extra tape, sandpaper and a dust brush.

I start taping at an inside corner, and being right-handed, work clockwise around the room, rolling backward. I peel away about a foot and a half of tape at a time and go along tacking it down at about 4-in. intervals, moving it sideways as needed for proper alignment. Then I slide my fingers across the tape (lightly at first, to avoid wrinkling it), pushing it down well. I scoot backwards on the stool and repeat the process. I stop about 1 in. short of inside corners and fill in with a short piece of tape. At outside corners, I'll let it run a little long.

Before going to another wall, I seal the edge of a tape run with the knife. As I roll forward on the cart, I run the knife left, then right, in short passes slightly varying the angle with each pass. When I reach the starting point, I back up again while still running the knife both ways. Thus, all of the tape gets about four passes with the knife, ensuring a good seal.

For a door casing, I start at a top corner and run the tape down, letting it lap over the top of the trim about ½ in. At the bottom I tear it to extend over the baseboard an inch or two. It must be tucked in the corner tightly—this is a prime place for paint to leak.

After sealing each piece of tape, I run my finger along the outside corner of the trim, making the tape slant inward slightly (away from the wall). This offsets the tape's natural tendency to curl backward, where it interferes with the roller.

I also run a strip of tape along the top of each door casing to shield it from spatter. I don't worry about knife-sealing this piece, unless the head casing can be seen from above. If a casing is close to an inside corner of the wall and its side doesn't show, I'll run the tape on the face of the trim and wrap it around the corner ¼ in. or so.

Windows are treated about the same as door casings, with extra attention paid to the protruding stool cap and the underside of the apron. It's also a good idea to mask (with paper, where possible) the exposed, horizontal portion of the stool cap and any other horizontal trim surfaces around the house that might fall victim to roller spatter from above.

I try to have the electrical outlets and switches installed before I paint the walls, so the electrician simply has to screw on the cover plates after painting. I tape off the outlets and switches before I spray trim and just leave the

same tape in place for the walls. If the house is "live," I turn off the electricity before masking outlets and switches.

If the walls have a sprayed-on orange peel texture, there are usually some large clumps that need to be knocked off before the painting begins. I use a drywall's pole scraper to remove them (photo facing page).

Tools and equipment—When it comes to painting walls, I just use an old-fashioned roller, a short extension pole, a roller pan and a



The tip of a pocket knife is a handy tool for sticking down the working edge of a run of masking tape. The intersection of baseboard and casing is vulnerable to leaks and needs to be thoroughly sealed. Note how the tape overhangs the baseboard, acting as an umbrella to shield it from roller spatter.



Scooting along on a roller stool, Papa can quickly tape baseboards without putting a strain on his back or his knees.

brush. But even these simple tools can vary a lot in quality and price, and I'm picky about the ones I choose.

Shopping for a good roller frame (the handle that supports the roller) is easy. Most any pro store will have a good-quality frame. I use 1½-in. dia. by 9-in. long rollers—the most common size. Larger ones are available, but are better suited for production work.

The roller cover (the part that holds the paint) is where the difference lies. I prefer real lambswool covers to synthetics. They hold

more paint, spatter less and are much easier to clean. Also, they require less force to get the paint out of the roller and onto the wall because the wool compresses so easily. This can be a real energy-saver. With every synthetic I've ever tried, much of the paint stays in the pile unless you exert a lot of force, and you end up carrying around the extra weight all day. Pushing hard to force out the paint can also cause a lot more spatter and leave more tracks.

Lambswool covers cost about \$8 to \$12, but

I consider that trivial compared with the labor cost of a job. Most manufacturers also offer a blend of synthetic fibers and wool, but I don't find these covers much of an improvement over ordinary synthetics.

Synthetics do have at least one advantage over wool (besides cost). The pile is tighter, so they tend to roll out the paint flatter, with less texture. Latex wall paint doesn't level out much on its own, so if very smooth walls are the goal, synthetic rollers may be the way to go.

Roller-cover nap lengths vary. Lambswool is generally available in ½-in. increments from ½ in. to 1¼ in. Synthetic naps come in similar lengths. Generally, the shorter the nap, the smoother the surface. For walls, I don't recommend naps shorter than ¾ in. and I use 1-in. or 1¼-in. covers because they can hold a lot of paint.

Some professionals like to paint out of a 5-gal. bucket, using a metal-grid insert to remove excess paint from the roller. I like roller pans, but I use big ones. A gallon of paint fills my pan about halfway, leaving enough room to roll out the excess.

An extension pole can make the work easy on your back; for walls, a short pole is best. I use a lightweight fiberglass-reinforced telescopic pole that extends from 2 ft. to 4 ft. That's plenty long enough for standard walls and ceilings.

I use a brush to coat areas the roller can't reach, like inside corners and next to trim. Natural hog-bristle brushes are not compatible with water-based paints because the bristles absorb water and become flimsy. Synthetic brushes, namely nylon and polyester (sometimes the two are blended), are better suited for latex. I prefer nylon brushes, and I typically use the ones made by Purdy with long, unlacquered handles (Purdy Corp., 13201 N. Lombard St., Portland, Ore. 97203; 503-286-8217). For most brushwork I'll use a 3-in. brush with the bristles cut back at an angle. Any larger than that and it's too difficult to do good cut-ins and get into tight areas.

For 8-ft. ceilings I use wooden benches to stand on for brushing next to ceilings. My benches are homemade and are about 21 in. tall. For higher work, I just use a good industrial-grade aluminum stepladder.

From flat to glossy—Flat latex wall paint has a lot going for it. Its velvety nature makes it easy to apply without overlap marks. The flat surface scatters light, and helps hide minor texture irregularities. It's nonflammable, doesn't smell too bad, can be recoated within hours and it's easy to clean off the tools. It does, however, scuff quite easily, and this is its biggest drawback.

I use flat latex wall paint in areas like bedrooms, living rooms, studies and dining rooms. In places subject to greater wear and tear, like laundry rooms, playrooms and hallways, I'll use a latex paint with some degree of sheen. Sheens vary with paint lines, but generally, after "flat," the sheen increases with eggshell, satin, semi-gloss and gloss. I'll go for a very



Last-minute touch-up. Textures can mask slight surface irregularities, but walls that have a sprayed-on "orange-peel" texture often have some large clumps that need to be taken off before painting begins. The author uses a drywall scraper to remove them.

low sheen, like eggshell or satin. Here in Alabama, kitchens, baths and breakfast areas are usually wallpapered.

I don't even consider oil-base paint for walls, mainly because of its obnoxious odor. I think modern latex enamels are plenty durable for walls—even for baths and kitchens.

On new drywall, a primer is usually not required under flat latex paint, or a paint with a very low level of sheen. Glossier paints may require a primer first to ensure a uniform appearance. Most manufacturers offer easy-to-use latex primers. On the occasions when I do have a need for a separate wall primer, I'll apply it right after the drywall is finished and textured. Also, walls to be papered should first be prepared with a primer compatible with wallpaper. It's hard enough to break the masking-tape joint when it's covered by two coats of latex, let alone three.

Most manufacturers offer at least three grades of latex wall paint. Generally, the more you pay, the better the paint. But often a wall paint second from the top will have most of the good qualities of its higher priced counterpart. I look for a paint that doesn't spatter excessively and that can be scrubbed some without washing off. Although the more expensive paints can endure more scrubbing, most mid-priced lines are plenty scrubbable. I also consider hiding power (the ability of a paint to cover in as few coats as possible) very important. Consumer's Union tests and rates major brands of latex wall paint every few years with specific references to spatter, hiding power, scrubbing and stain removal. (If you don't subscribe to their monthly magazine, *Consumer Reports*, you can find it in most libraries.) Paints are always changing, so I rely on *Consumer's* ratings and my own experience. Wall paint just doesn't hide like it used to, so you might as well abandon the one-coat concept from the start. I always go with two coats, even in closets.

Unless the job is awfully big, I'll usually buy 1-gal. cans instead of 5-gal. pails, even though the pails are slightly cheaper per gallon. Despite the possibility that subsequent cans of a custom color might not match the first, it's better to figure a little conservatively because custom colors can't be returned for credit.

Paint-can labels give estimated coverage, and measuring from blueprints can yield a fairly accurate figure for the total square footage of walls. But the actual spread rate can vary a lot, depending on tools, texture and who's doing the painting. I put wall paint on pretty heavily, and my coverage is usually low compared to what the label says. Except when spraying it, I never thin latex wall paint.

Basic brushwork—I paint one room at a time, first painting edges and corners with a brush and then rolling it out. Because my ceilings are usually finished ahead, I start by cutting in at the corner where wall and ceiling meet. With the 3-in. brush loaded, bristles pointed straight up, I ride the tip of the bristles in the corner and move the brush sideways,

making an even line. It's best to load only one side of the brush. I work from left to right, and as I'm making the cut-in, I drop the brush about a ¼ in. below the ceiling and jiggle it as I move it sideways, unloading the bulk of the paint. I won't be able to roll right up to the ceiling, so patting the brush on the wall like this leaves a stippled effect that is more compatible with the roller's texture. I trim the top widely—about 5 in. This way I don't have to get up on a bench and roll sideways next to the ceiling.

Just about everything else is taped off, so the rest of the brushwork is easy. I brush only a narrow line along all the tape, because I'll be able to roll right up to it. If the tape's going to leak, it'll probably be from this first brushed coat so I spread it thin. When it dries, it will help to seal the tape from any further leaking.

Any brush marks left next to the trim are quickly covered with the roller, so I don't usually bother stippling the texture. If the paint is drying unusually fast, or if the room is a big one, I sometimes stipple it anyway, just to be sure that no brush marks show through. I also brush inside corners. As for electrical outlets, I just roll right up to them (plates removed).

Because I spray my trim, there are always a few inches of overspray on the walls. I put the wall paint right on top of it, so a point should be made here about proper adhesion. A general rule of painting is never to paint over a glossy surface without first dulling that surface. However, I generally don't deem it necessary to dull the trim overspray and here's why. First of all, I use relatively low sheen (semi-gloss or satin) trim paints and varnishes. Paint will stick to them pretty well for the same reason that they're not quite as cleanable as full-gloss finishes. Also, I paint my walls within a few days after finishing trim. The trim finish is fresh, and the surface is still relatively soft, which promotes a stronger bond. The rules are different if the trim finish has been allowed to harden for a few weeks, or if it's pretty high in gloss. Then I would seriously consider deglossing it. If the wall is smooth, sandpaper (100-grit to 150-grit) would work best. A textured wall could be deglossed with steel wool.

We're rolling now—After a room is trimmed out, I'm ready to roll. I fill my jumbo pan with a gallon of paint and load the heavy wool cover by rolling it into the paint, submerging only the pile. I roll it forward into the paint about a third-revolution, lift it out of the pan, back off and repeat, until the whole nap is saturated (it will take a couple of roll-outs before it gets well saturated). I load the roller with as much paint as it can hold so I don't have to dip it as often. Latex paint won't drip much from a good wool roller, even with a full load.

Rolling patterns vary with painters and can become a matter of preference. Paint manuals and literature often compare them to letters of the alphabet, namely N, M and W. I roll something like a double-N pattern.

I start in a corner and go clockwise around



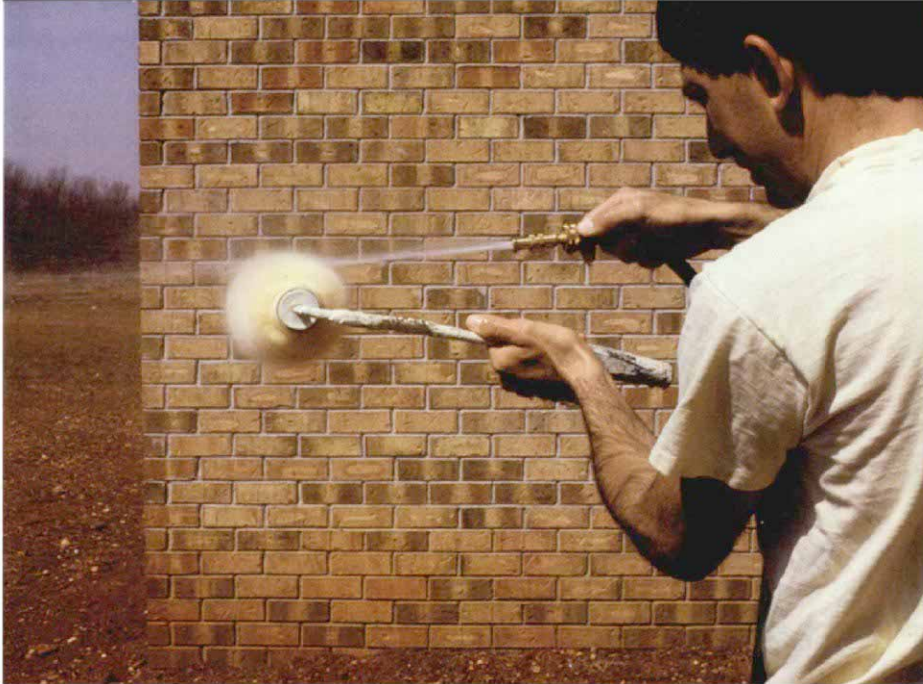
Beginning at the left corner on a wall, the author levels out a patch of flat latex paint. The cut-in is wide enough to allow him to stop the roller within a couple of inches of the ceiling.

the room, working from left to right on the wall (photo above). I touch down the loaded roller midway up the wall and roll up to and over the ceiling trim-out, pushing the roller up to the ceiling as close as I feel is safe without touching it. From that point, I roll back down at about a 10° angle, then straight up again, down at an angle and up once more. This covers an area of about 12 sq. ft.

As I roll out the paint, I start off using light pressure and increase pressure as the roller empties. With a wool cover, very little force is needed to get most of the paint out. After the paint is rolled out in my pattern, I roll the emptied roller over the whole thing again, using light pressure, to even out the texture and to get rid of any tracks left by the first passes. I roll straight up and down for this, lifting the roller off the wall and moving it over, overlapping about a third to half the width of the roller cover. This "leveling-out" step should be done right after the paint is spread out for each section. If you try to spread too much paint before leveling out, water from the paint will penetrate into the drywall and the film will quickly become pasty. This makes it more difficult to level out, as the thickening film tends to close the pile of the roller cover.

After I finish the first section, I'll do the section beneath it, down to the baseboard. I then start again at the top, over to the right, then beneath it and so on. Following this pattern allows me to work the "wet edge" of the paint (where roller marks disappear as the paint is leveled out), around the room in a methodical manner. I roll as close as possible to the trim, letting the roller's texture prevail. It's a good idea to check the trim for spatter every so often—the quicker it's caught, the easier it is to clean up.

It's easy to tell when flat latex wall paint is dry and ready for a second coat—the sheen turns from glossy to flat. A lot of the water actually penetrates into the drywall and evapo-



Back on its cleaned roller frame, a furry lambswool roller goes for a cleansing spin powered by a carefully directed blast from a garden hose.

rates later, so the areas that have enamel overspray on them from trim spraying will take the longest to dry (the wall is pretty well sealed off from penetration at these places). The sealed area right above the baseboard is usually the last to dry.

If you're painting smooth walls, chances are that the first coat of paint will have revealed some imperfections. Now is the time to fix small dents, scratches and pits, using spackling compound. Sometimes the drywall joints show because the drywall finishers oversanded the seams. You can minimize this problem with extra coats of paint, lightly sanding between coats.

Before beginning the second coat, I go around and lift the edges of any tape that have folded onto the trim. For the second coat, the only brushwork I do is another quick pass to within $\frac{1}{4}$ in. of the ceiling. As for the taped trim, I just roll right up to it this time, without brushing. This means that I'll have to get closer to the baseboard than with the first coat, so I roll next to it sideways before starting my regular pattern.

When I roll ceilings, I also apply two coats. I'll do a 3-ft. to 4-ft. wide strip at a time, rolling across the room's shorter dimension, so it's easier to keep the leading edge wet.

Cleaning up—First I remove the roller cover from the frame and squeeze as much paint as possible out of the nap and back into the pan. You can buy a special metal tool for this, but I find it too hard on the nap so I just use my hands. Cover squeezed, I run water through the nap until the water is clear. Then I put it back on the cleaned frame, turn the hose nozzle on full, and spin the roller to ring it out and even out the nap (top left photo). I store the cover on its end so it will keep its shape.

A brand new wool roller cover will have slightly rounded edges. When painting, this helps avoid tracks. After a couple of uses, I

sometimes have to round the edges again with a pair of scissors.

I hold brushes upside down under the faucet so the water can run into the roots of the bristles. Soap and warm water can help loosen paint that has already set up. A wire brush can loosen stubborn paint on the outside. After cleaning, I use a brush comb to straighten out the bristles. You can buy them, but I made my own by driving 5d finishing nails into a scrap of wood, $\frac{3}{8}$ in. apart in a square pattern.

I clean paint cans and lids with a soft plastic cleaning pad to avoid scratching the rust-resistant coating. The cans are handy for mixing paints and as containers for touch up paints left with my customers after a job. Removing the lip with a can opener turns them into handy buckets.

Stripping the tape—The most important consideration in removing masking tape is deciding when to do it. Pull the tape off too soon and the new wall paint could peel off in places. Wait too long and the wall paint will have become so hard that the tape will keep tearing into short pieces. Usually, stripping it two days after the last coat is applied is about right. It's time to peel when the dried paint bridging the edge of the tape and the wall crumbles into tiny pieces as the tape is being pulled off. If it tends to stretch and tear, wait a while longer.

Wall paint is tough, and it can be hard for the tape to break it at the joint without tearing. To help avoid tearing the tape, I peel it back at an angle, toward the wall (photo above right). If the tape is difficult to remove it helps to make a cut with a razor knife along the tape's edge.

No matter how good the taping, there are usually a couple of places where the paint leaked through, especially at inside corners where two pieces of trim meet. To clean up the leaks, I use my pocket knife and a wet towel. Most wall paint can still be scrubbed off after it's been on the wall for just a few days.



Once the wall paint has hardened for a couple of days, the tape can be peeled away from the trim. Angling the tape toward the wall can help cut down on the amount of tearing.

A worst-case scenario is when defective tape leaves much of its adhesive on the trim's edge. This can be a real mess; a pocket knife, a rag soaked with mineral spirits and a lot of time is about the only remedy I can offer.

Touching up—By the time all the trades have left, I always have a few touch-ups to do. My first strategy is to clean dirty spots with a damp *white* cloth or paper towel. The paint has to be completely hardened before vigorously scrubbing it, which can typically take a month or more.

If that doesn't work, I get out a very small brush. Always fearing a bad match, I put on as little paint as possible. Don't paint a 4-in. square blotch on a dime-sized mark. I use a soft artist brush and paint only over the scuff or mark itself, dabbing the paint on instead of brushing it. I try to feather the touch-up into the surrounding area. On a very smooth wall, I sometimes use my finger to feather-edge.

Sometimes there's a small dimple or hole in the wall to patch. In doing this, maintaining the surrounding texture is most important. For little holes, a dab of latex caulk can usually be employed to imitate the surrounding texture. For bigger patches on a texture like orange peel I thin joint compound to the consistency of latex paint and spatter it over the area with the bristles of a whisk broom. Practice this first.

On occasions I've had rust bleed through the paint from outside corner bead. This is usually caused by oversanding the corner bead. For this and any other type of bleeding, I use either Kilz (Masterchem Industries, P. O. Box 368, Barnhart, Mo. 63012; 314-942-3348), an oil-base stain-killer/primer, or a white pigmented shellac, like Zinsser's B-I-N (William Zinsser & Co., Inc., 39 Belmont Dr., Somerset, N. J. 08875; 201-469-8100). □

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