



If you are contracting EXTERIOR HOUSE PAINTING

When obtaining bids to have your house painted, you should discuss with each contractor several important issues. Because preparation and painting are so labor-intensive, the price that a contractor quotes for a job will frequently depend on how you define the quality of workmanship you are seeking. For that reason, in addition to discussing the type and color of paint that will be used, it's important to clarify the work that the contractor will do **BEFORE** the paint is applied.

The preparation work that a painter does will not only affect how your house looks – it will also help determine how long the paint job will last. Because in most communities the painter does not need to obtain a permit for this job, you will not be protected by an inspection by the Building Department when the work is completed. That makes it all the more important to discuss with the contractor just what kind of a result you are looking for, and what it will cost. If you signal to the contractor that you are only concerned with getting the lowest price, the most likely place to reduce costs will be in the preparation. In a worst cast scenario, paint can simply be applied over the existing surface, with no cleaning or removal of the old paint. (A house painted in this way will usually start peeling in short order.) The other extreme is to have the old paint removed completely, down to the bare wood; while this will produce the most long-lasting result, the preparation costs can be higher than your budget will allow. Negotiating a “middle ground” in such cases might give you acceptable quality and longevity within a price you can afford.

What kinds of preparation might be involved? Before painting, the contractor should make all needed repairs to the siding and trim (replacing rotted, decayed, or badly cracked wood; securing loose siding or nails; removing any hooks and nails that are no longer in use; and covering over nail holes, rusty nail heads, and small cracks with vinyl spackling). This is also the time when caulk and glazing should be checked, and replaced as needed – especially around your doors and windows, and where siding butts up against a roof slope or masonry. Most painters can do these minor carpentry jobs as part of the preparation process, or you might decide to lower your cost by doing some of the work yourself.

The biggest problem will be dealing with the old paint that has built up on the surface of your house over the years. In most cases, that old paint will have cracked or “checkered,” allowing moisture to get behind the paint layer. Before applying a new coat, the contractor must remove that damaged paint.

However, if your house was built before 1978, there is a good chance that one or more of those layers of old paint may contain lead. In dealing with any loose, blistering, or peeling areas, you should make sure that the painter will take care to protect your family and the environment from this lead-based paint.

Some painters have pursued special training in how to deal with lead-painted surfaces. Even if you don't utilize one of these licensed or certified contractors, you should discuss how the painter proposes to remove deteriorated paint. Because of the danger when lead-laden dust is released into the atmosphere or contaminates the soil around your house, certain methods of paint removal are now prohibited in many communities with older homes, including Cleveland Heights. Dry sanding or dry scraping is no longer allowed, except in conjunction with heat guns or immediately

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around electrical outlets, or when treating small spots of defective paint on exterior surfaces totaling no more than 20 square feet. Paint removal with an open flame or burning torch is also prohibited, as is use of a heat gun that operates above 1100° Fahrenheit or that chars the paint. And, the contractor will not be able to remove paint by machine sanding or grinding, by abrasive blasting or sandblasting, or with volatile paint strippers. (There are a few paint strippers that claim to remove lead paint safely, but they tend to be rather expensive, especially for the whole exterior surface of a house.)

So, what *can* the contractor do to remove chipping or peeling paint? The best solution is for the painter to remove as much loose paint as possible by wet scraping, capturing all the paint chips with heavy-duty tarps and cleaning up daily. Then, if desired, the whole house can be washed down with a pressure washer and a detergent like TSP (applied at the lower-pressure “wash” setting that doesn’t disturb the old paint), rinsed well, and allowed to dry completely before the paint is applied. This cleaning will remove dirt and chalking (from oxidized paint), giving a better surface for the new paint to adhere to.

After removing the loose paint, the painter can fill in any “craters” (areas where the bare wood is lower than the painted areas around them) with exterior vinyl spackling, so they come up level with the surrounding areas. (This method is 100% safer than sanding lead-based paint, and will give a neat finish when painted.) If you need to cut costs, you may want to skip this step, at least on the less visible areas of the house; the process does not increase the longevity of the job, but will result in a nicer “look.” Priming, however, is essential. While an entire coat of primer is best, having the painter spot-prime any bare wood or spackling is an acceptable compromise.

Your cost will also be affected by any “problem areas” that require special treatment. If there are areas where paint fails repeatedly, for example, you’ll want to talk with the contractor about how to solve the problem. Blistering paint can be caused by condensation in the outer walls of your house, particularly outside high-moisture areas like bathrooms and kitchens. You may wish to have small louvered vents installed in the siding to increase air flow and help keep these areas dry. If there are metal surfaces where rust has built up, the painter should scrape them and apply a rust-inhibiting primer, or use a rust-converter to stabilize the surface.

Find out what type of paint your contractor is recommending for the job—it can affect how long your paint job will last. Latex paint will let water evaporate through it without blistering and peeling, but it expands and contracts at a different rate than oil-based paint. Your choice will primarily depend on the paint that is already on your house, although there are primers that will allow you to switch from one type to the other. Regardless of whether you’ll be using oil or latex, make sure the paint is medium grade or better. Also, if you are changing colors, ask whether one coat will be sufficient to hide the old color; with some combinations, you may need to use – and pay for – a second coat.

Don’t forget weather concerns. Your contract should specify that painting be done only when the surfaces to be painted are thoroughly dry and when no rain is expected before the new paint can dry. The temperature – even at night – should remain above 50° F to allow the paint to cure properly. (If you **MUST** have the painting done in cold weather, make sure the painter will use one of the new paints designed for weather down to 35° F.)

Make sure you discuss how the contractor will protect your property and your house. The contractor should agree to repair or replace any gutters or other areas damaged during the course of the preparation or painting. Include in your contract the contractor’s promise that all work will be done in a neat and workmanlike manner. Plants, sidewalks, and other areas around your house should be covered with protective tarps, to prevent damage to those surfaces, and the contractor should agree to clean up immediately all accidental drips, spills, or overspray – onto a driveway, off the dormers onto your roof, off the trim onto your brick house, etc. (And, you should plan to be home when the work is done – you don’t need to be an expert to spot sloppy work!)

Finally, ask what warranty will be provided on the work (both from the manufacturer on the product and from the contractor on the workmanship), and what insurance protection the painter has in case of injury to his crew and/or damage to your property. If you decide to use a painter who does not provide these protections, you may trade a lower initial cost for long-term problems.