

MATERIAL CHANGES

The Latest in Siding, Decking, Roofing & Fencing

In the midst of the sluggish housing market, manufacturers struggle to introduce innovations in home-exterior products. As a result, they've tweaked some products and added longer warranties.

By Drew Vass

Spring, the calendar tells us, is on the way. The return of warmer weather might have you thinking about outdoor remodeling projects. Although the number of new siding, decking, roofing and fencing products that have come to market in the past few years has decreased under the grip of these tough economic times, manufacturers of home-exterior products are exploring ways to tweak their products to attract reluctant customers.

Vinyl-siding manufacturers have increased the length of their siding pieces to reduce the number of overlaps that many consumers consider to be unsightly. Further, composite decking has undergone a facelift, and the new version is intended to fix issues that plagued the appearance of its predecessor. Meanwhile, roofing manufacturers have all but done away with term-based

warranties of 30 or 45 years and have replaced those with lifetime warranties.

It all sounds good, but you should be aware that some of the recent developments when it comes to home-exterior products aren't all that they're cracked up to be.

TAKING SIDES. For decades, vinyl-siding manufacturers sought to emulate the look of cedar and other types of solid board siding in their products, although no one yet argues that the differences are indiscernible. A continuing problem that vinyl siding presents is that installers must overlap the pieces where two pieces come together, which creates visible vertical lines on the side of a home. (Other siding materials—fiber cement, wood and wood composites—aren't overlapped.)

Consequently, manufacturers sought to overcome this issue by introducing longer siding that's meant to reduce the number of overlaps on a home's exterior walls. At least five companies now make vinyl-siding pieces that are 20–25 feet long. These ultralong pieces reduce the number of overlaps by about 50 percent.

Siding manufacturers say they don't charge any extra per foot for longer vinyl

pieces. But you'll pay more for longer pieces, because distributors and dealers mark up shipping-and-handling costs by as much as 20 percent for vinyl-siding boards that are 20 feet or longer.

And you might be nicked for even more than that if you choose longer boards. Based on our discussions with eight contractors, half of them say they charge extra for labor when they install the longer version. They say pieces that

the long view Companies now make vinyl-siding pieces that are 20–25 feet long.

are 20 feet or longer are more difficult to install than are the 12- or 16-foot varieties. Consequently, contractors who charge extra justify an additional 20 percent markup in labor charges by suggesting that it takes as many as three installers to handle and affix 20- to 25-foot pieces.

Contractors who don't charge extra say this practice is dishonest, because longer vinyl-siding pieces are no more difficult to install than are 12- or 16-foot pieces and they actually go up faster. (Naturally, despite this contention of quicker installation, none of the con-

tractors with whom we spoke charges *less* for installing longer vinyl pieces.)

If you like the idea of having fewer overlaps that result from longer vinyl-siding pieces, we believe that your best bet is to have contractors draw up two quotes—one for standard 12-foot lengths (nobody charges extra to install 16-foot pieces), the other for long versions. If you notice a higher labor rate on the quote for longer siding pieces, it's worth

your while to see whether another contractor in your area doesn't jack up labor charges on the longer siding pieces.

FULL DECKS. When it comes to decking, manufacturers say they have found a solution to the shortcomings of wood-plastic composite decking.

Composite decking long has been marketed as a low-maintenance alternative to pressure-treated wood, but manufacturers readily admit that the organic materials that are found in composite materials make the product prone to stains or mold and require strong cleaning products.

The good news is that manufacturers now have a product that they say is designed to get it right this time. So-called capstock decking was introduced in October 2008, and now it's made by at least five major decking manufacturers under seven different brands.

Capstock is composite decking that's encapsulated in a variety of polymer-based materials—each company has proprietary formulas—for further protection. A cross-section view of a capstock board discloses a standard composite core that's surrounded by a thin shell on three or sometimes all four sides. (In some cases, the bottom of capstock decking is left uncovered, because the issues that plague regular composites don't reach the bottom—where the sun doesn't shine, ketchup and wine don't spill, and mold isn't visible.)

Although manufacturers tell us that mold and mildew can grow on capstock decking, they say the absence of organic materials in the cap material



ALL HANDS ON DECK. Capstock decking clads composite boards in polymer-based material, which makes them resistant to fading and mold.

composite decking starts at about \$1.65 per lineal foot. Decking dealers tell us that the types that typically are purchased most often fetch about \$2.65 per lineal foot, or around \$833 for an average 12-by-12 deck (board widths vary slightly from brand to brand). However, the least expensive capstock boards start at about \$3.25 per lineal foot (and go as high as \$4.25), or around \$1,021 for the same size deck. At \$3.25 per lineal foot, that means that you'll pay around \$188 extra for a deck that's composed of the least expensive capstock compared with the most common standard composite (and \$502 more than the least expensive regular composite decking).

Because of the price difference, regular composite decking, despite all of its flaws, still is widely available. As capstock matures and possibly comes down in cost, traditional composites might fall by the wayside. However, we don't expect to see that happening any time soon, because most manufacturers say they will continue to offer traditional composites as a low-cost alternative.

RAISE THE ROOF. If you shopped as recently as 2 years ago for asphalt shingles, which still are the most common type of roofing that's installed, then you know that manufacturers offered the longest warranties only on their premium products. That's changed. Now, lifetime warranties for three of the four major manufacturers' shingles appear on all but the least expensive products.

Based on a review of a distributor's data, the upgrade involves at least 12 shingle products. GAF, which started the lifetime-warranty trend as of Jan. 1, 2011, upgraded five products. We found that CertainTeed, which says it always has had some lifetime warranties, upgraded five shingle styles to that level since 2009. Owens Corning, which joined the lifetime-warranty surge Jan. 24, 2011, upgraded two shingle products to lifetime warranties since 2010.

The minimum cost for shingles that have lifetime warranties now starts at about \$98 per square, which covers 100 square feet of roof surface. No manufacturer or distributor could tell us the cost of shingles that had a lifetime warranty in 2010, before the expansion of

Catch a Breath: A Smog-Eating Roof?

Last December, Boral Roofing announced national distribution for a roofing product that's aimed at cleaning up the environment. The company's BoralPure roof tiles contain titanium dioxide, which the company says neutralizes the nitrogen oxide particles that are found in smog. The company claims that over a 1-year period, a typical 2,000-square-foot roof that's clad with its BoralPure tiles can neutralize about the same amount of nitrogen oxide as a single car produces from being driven 10,800 miles.

But before you write a check for the extra 25 percent that this product costs over regular roof tiles, you should be aware that unless you live in an urban area that's known for smog issues, BoralPure tiles will do little to improve the environment. "Of course, if you're going to remove smog, you need smog in the first place," admits John Renowden of Boral.

But Renowden suggests that the product could have an effect if it were used widely enough. "It's a bit like a catalytic converter in a car. If you're the only one who has a catalytic converter, then it doesn't make a lot of difference. But as [cars] all have catalytic converters these days, they make a considerable difference."

Chemists and environmental scientists with whom we spoke are less enthusiastic about the innovation. They tell Consumers Digest that, although it's possible that the product might work based on its material makeup, the expected effect that smog-eating roof tiles would make would be negligible.

lifetime warranties.

The fourth major player, TAMKO, didn't increase overall warranties, but on Feb. 1, 2011, it expanded its startup coverage, which is the period in which manufacturers pay both for materials and labor for replacement shingles, to 15 or 20 years from 5–10 years, depending on the product. Other manufacturers have 10-year startup periods. (All manufacturers have 3- or 5-year startup coverage on their least expensive shingles.)

Further, manufacturers wouldn't say why they made the move, but it didn't seem to correspond with significant product innovation. GAF changed the composition of the materials that go into its asphalt shingles in 2007 by reformulating its fiberglass mat and its adhesives. GAF then applied the new formula to all of its shingles in 2010. The new formula uses less asphalt and limestone than previous versions did, but GAF says the lighter shingles are more durable, although it was coy on what makes them more durable.

Owens Corning says it re-engineered the fiberglass matting in its shingles as well as improved how well that its asphalt and sealants withstand weather. The company was vague on the timing and other details of those changes but says no material changes accompanied the warranty upgrade. CertainTeed and

TAMKO say they haven't changed their asphalt shingles.

You should be aware that the change to a lifetime warranty was applied to all new products retroactively—even those that might have sat on store shelves for months. So if you purchased shingles in 2011, and the package didn't include a lifetime warranty, you might be in luck. GAF upgraded its warranty to include any of its shingles that were installed on or after Jan. 1, 2011. Despite what the product packaging might have said, those installed shingles have lifetime coverage now. Owens Corning automatically increased its coverage effective Jan. 24, 2011, and TAMKO changed its warranties starting Feb. 1, 2011. You should check the manufacturer's website to determine whether your shingles are among those that were upgraded to lifetime coverage. If so, you're entitled to an automatic upgrade if your purchase falls on or after those dates.

We applaud the move, but the improved peace of mind still comes at a premium. The least expensive shingles that have lifetime warranties—\$98 per square—cost \$2,352 for a typical 2,400-square-foot roof. By contrast, the least expensive shingles that carry a 20-year warranty cost \$81 per square, or \$1,944 for a typical roof.

(Continued on page 72)

means that any mold or mildew can't bond, so it can be washed off easily with soap and water, unlike on regular composite decking, which requires the use of deck cleaners that contain sodium hypochlorite (bleach). As long as you wash off food spills within a week, the deck should be fine, according to manufacturers' care-and-cleaning guides. In addition, manufacturers claim that cleaning capstock's smooth finish twice a year with a solution of standard household detergent should maintain its initial look for at least 25 years.

Manufacturers are willing to back up their claims in writing. Capped boards—composite boards that have an inorganic shell—are warranted for 25 years not only against product failure due to manufacturing defects, such as splintering, splitting or rot, but also against fading, scratching, staining and being defaced permanently by mold or mildew. By comparison, regular composites are warranted only against manufacturing defects. The sun also causes standard composite decking to fade unless you're willing to apply a stain every 1–4 years, depending on the stain that you use and the climate where you live. However, manufacturers of composite decking don't suggest the use of stains, because telling you to apply stain blows a hole in their "low-maintenance" claims, but they say staining your deck won't affect the performance of the materials. In other words, they suggest that you accept the faded appearance.

Whether capstock decking ultimately will live up to the low-maintenance mantra that manufacturers originally pushed for regular composite decking remains to be seen. A problem has cropped up: The ends of capstock boards, which aren't covered by the capstock material, reportedly swell because of excess water. That happens only in specific circumstances, says Shane O'Neill of Compositology, which is an independent tester of composite products, such as in a location that receives regular rainfall but less sunlight than do other locations. O'Neill anticipates that someone will develop a sealant for such instances, but he doesn't know when that will happen.

You should know that you'll pay more for capstock decking: Regular



Insulated From Reality? Siding Layer Doesn't Add Much

If you're looking at ways to make your home more energy-efficient, you should be wary of insulated siding. Insulated siding has been around, but last year it was added to International Code Council's International Energy Conservation Code. That standard is a guideline for many local building codes that guide additions or renovations. In other words, insulated siding now is seen as a quick way to improve your home's energy-efficiency. But experts tell Consumers Digest that insulated siding adds little *R-value*, which is the measure of how much heat that a product, such as siding, retains.

Insulated siding has a layer of polystyrene foam that's laminated on the back of the vinyl siding, which makes it handle more like a solid board (instead of a wet noodle) and adds an insulating value of R-2 or R-3 to the siding. Handling advantages aside, before you shell out twice as much for insulated siding compared with regular vinyl siding, you should know that energy experts tell us that adding R-2 or R-3 insulation over standard wall insulation is like slipping on a T-shirt over a down jacket. In other words, it doesn't add much.

"If it's going on a new structure, or any that's done to current Department of Energy standards for that matter, then R-2 to R-3 isn't going to make that big of a difference," says Kirk Lindstrom of Building Energy Experts, which is a Crystal Lake, Ill., company that performs home energy audits. And, he says, if the siding were to go over a wall that has no insulation to begin with, "it's just a drop in the bucket in terms of what you need."

A more effective route, he says, would be to replace your current interior wall insulation with a product that carries a high R-value rating. For instance, he says, standard fiberglass batt insulation, which is the type that's used most commonly, provides about an R-11 value. Siding manufacturers with which we spoke agree that insulated siding is intended to supplement, not supplant, typical wall insulation.

And as for the polystyrene insulation itself, we aren't concerned about any potential health risks of insulated siding. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) released in June 2011 a report about carcinogens that classified styrene as "reasonably anticipated to be a human carcinogen." (Other substances that have that same classification include certain glass wool fibers and fungicide chemicals.)

Siding manufacturers typically use polystyrene for their insulation, from which styrene can leach, but because the polystyrene isn't incorporated into interior air space, we doubt whether this development will mean any health risks, and thus, it likely won't affect siding products. We couldn't find any manufacturers that say they will change their products as a result of the HHS report.



HOME EXTERIOR

(Continued from page 52)

If aesthetics isn't your priority, we aren't convinced that the \$408 difference is worth it. The lifetime warranty applies only for as long as you live in your home. The good news is that if you plan to sell your home within the next 10 years, the lifetime warranty is fully transferable to the new owner, although we didn't find any data that suggest whether that's a purchasing consideration for potential buyers. (If you sell after 10 years, the coverage is reduced to a measly 2 years for the next owner.) So, unless you plan to stay in your home for longer than 20 years, which is the lowest term-based warranty, we believe that you shouldn't pay extra just to get a lifetime warranty.

FENCE ME IN. Shiny might look good on your automobile but not so much on your fence. The typically shiny look of vinyl fencing is a common source of complaints, but at least two companies introduced versions that are designed to reduce the shiny appearance.

In May 2011, Illusions Vinyl Fence introduced vinyl fencing that it calls Vinyl Woodbond that's designed to mimic the look of wood by including wood-grain patterns in a matte finish. The result is something that won't reflect the sun's glare like ordinary vinyl does. CertainTeed took a similar approach with its Bufftech Galveston line. Introduced in April 2009, the product has a simulated wood grain, which the company calls CertaGrain, and has a dull finish. Based on our observations, either product does a better job of resembling wood than do typical vinyl fences.

You'll pay quite a bit more for the dull-finish vinyl fencing—from about \$225 per panel for Vinyl Woodbond privacy fencing to about \$277 per panel for Bufftech Galveston. The least expensive vinyl privacy fence costs as little as \$44 per panel.

In other words, realistic-looking fencing might be easier on your eyes, but it won't be kind to your wallet. ●

Drew Vass is a regular contributor to Consumers Digest. He has covered building products as an editor and writer for several magazines, including Shelter and Door & Window Manufacturer.

What Is A Best Buy?



A CONSUMERS DIGEST Best Buy is a product that delivers exceptional value for a given amount of money. That doesn't mean that it's simply the least expensive product that's in its category. A Consumers Digest Best Buy is one that merits special attention from consumers based on its combination of eight criteria:

performance, ease of use, features, quality of construction, warranty, efficiency, styling, and maintenance and service requirements. Because virtually all product categories cover a range of prices, there's no such thing as *the* Best Buy, in practical terms.

Of course, every product category includes many excellent, worthwhile products, but some of these we don't deem Best Buys, because their high price relative to competitive models excludes them from consideration. For us, value is defined via a simple equation: perceived quality divided by cost. Consequently, price (the manufacturer's suggested retail price, specifically—not retail prices) is a key consideration in selecting our Best Buys. As perceived quality increases and cost remains the same, value increases; likewise, as perceived quality remains the same and cost decreases, value also increases.

The process for selecting Consumers Digest Best Buys is rigorous. It begins with identifying all of the products that are available to U.S. consumers in a particular category. Often that list is long (50–100 models). We call it the product universe. All model information must derive from manufacturers, not retail, website or other sources. Manufacturers represent the most reliable source. On average, only a small percentage of all products that we evaluate are deemed Consumers Digest Best Buys.

The first step in evaluating products for Best Buy consideration is to ensure that they meet four basic criteria: national availability in retail stores or via an established online retailer; a national dealer network/service organization to support repairs/service; a manufacturer of established reputation (unless it's part of a genuinely new technology); availability for at least 6 months after the publication date of Consumers Digest's Best Buy recommendation.

The products that meet these criteria are then assessed based on the eight specific criteria listed above. This assessment is carried out in numerous ways: hands-on use; review of independent evaluation/testing; review of reports from government agencies and others; interviews of retailers and service technicians; review of evaluations from other entities. Our research methodology is based on using a product as it was designed to be used in real life. Many are the situations where Consumers Digest staff samples numerous models to include first-hand experience in the overall evaluation of various models in a category. These have included assembling and using 25 different outdoor grills; putting a half-dozen carpet cleaners through their paces; and assessing the security of entry-door locks in terms of their resistance to being picked.

When all of the hands-on evaluation, where applicable, and all other research is complete, the number of products that are under consideration for recommendation is dwindled to a select few. These are grouped by price range, because products come at multiple prices and consumers have different price levels at which they define value. The products that we ultimately deem Best Buys typically will be classified into three categories: [P] Premium selection, which denotes that a product is full-featured and delivers excellent performance but is priced accordingly; [M] Midrange selection, which indicates that a product has many desirable features and good performance at a price that's below the top of the line for the category; and [E] Economy selection, which means that a product delivers satisfactory performance via basic features at an advantageous price for cost-conscious consumers.

Every product-category evaluation is spearheaded by Consumers Digest senior editors. On each product evaluation, at least one expert evaluator/writer is hired to collaborate. In the automotive category, for example, six experts whose experience totals 140 years' coverage of autos contribute to our ultimate recommendations in 12 categories of cars, pickups, minivans, SUVs and hybrids.