

Maintaining the front porch

Do you think the front porch, where families used to sit to watch the world go by, enjoy the weather and socialize with friends, is a quaint relic of the past? You might be surprised to hear that, according to the National Association of Home Builders, 53 percent of new homes now are built with front porches. People once again seem to be attracted to the concept of the porch as a place to relax, enjoy friends and family and commune with nature.

Although porches of different types have existed in most cultures throughout history, the North American front porch became a distinct phenomenon from the 1870s until the 1930s. If you have a house built in this era, there's a good chance it came with an open or screened porch.

A well-maintained porch can be a charming extension of your living space, especially at this time of year. But keeping one in good shape does require a certain investment of money and labor.

Something Rotten?

Contractors agree that the most common and most serious maintenance issues involve rotting wood.

"The most typical problem would be wood that needs replacing, whether the floor boards or the ceiling boards," said Ellen Tesauro of All Decks & Improvement, Wayne (alldecksandimprovement.com). "We had to rebuild one porch that was all brick and the stairs were literally falling down. We used concrete blocks and new brick. We were able to keep to the original look, except it was all new materials."

Tesauro said her company also rebuilt another porch that was actually pulling away from the home — "Besides being in such disrepair and neglect, it was unsafe!"

She explained that it is difficult to quote a price for a porch repair because there are so many aspects and each case is so different. "To replace a porch would be between \$20-\$40 a square foot, depending on the finishes," she estimated.

Tesauro warned porch owners to watch out for red flags such as peeling paint, a mildewed smell or a "mushy" floor.

"With an open porch, periodically check the wooden floor and ceiling boards; check the roof, if there is one, for leaks; rescreen any screens when needed; and maintain the paint or stain," she said.

Support Systems

Restoring an older porch is also a familiar job for Alleva Construction, Hackensack (allevaconstruction.com). Company president Mike Alleva noted several areas where a vintage porch can develop problems:

- floor
- footings
- columns
- railings
- roof/ceiling

Typical warning signs are:

- sagging or wavy floorboards
- floor not level
- steps crooked
- roof sags between the columns.

"The floor is usually tongue-and-groove wood and the planks can become rotten," he said, adding that this is the part a homeowner probably will notice first. "When we pull up the floor, the frame also may be rotten. Or it may not have been built correctly, because the codes we have today didn't exist back then."

The footings, or masonry piers beneath the porch, often don't extend three feet below ground, as is required today — again, because of the lack of codes 80-100 years ago — so they also may have to be rebuilt.

"The support columns are usually wood, and they often have rotted at the cap and the base," Alleva said. "These days, manufacturers make fiberglass columns that will never rot, so we'll replace (the originals) with those."

He said matching fiberglass railings also are available, and can preserve a traditional look while

saving the homeowner a lot of maintenance.

Manufacturers such as Certainteed (certainteed.com) make vinyl and composite railing and decking, as well as vinyl wraps for existing wooden posts.

Finishing Touches

"For the floors, most people today want natural wood," Alleva said. "We'll use mahogany and just stain it to show off the beauty of the grain. Porch ceilings are usually beadboard, so we'll put in natural beadboard and stain it like the floor."

Often a porch has hand-made latticework around the lower exterior, and his craftsmen also can recreate that look.

Like Tesauro, Alleva hesitated to quote the cost for a typical job, because each one is so different. "As you're getting into it and find

more that has to be fixed, the cost changes," he said.

He recommended hiring an experienced company that knows all the common pitfalls that occur with an older home, and not just a handyman.

"Usually, (the job will) need both masonry and carpentry skills," he explained. "For instance, you may have masonry steps with a wooden floor. A lot of homes in Ridgewood have fieldstone columns with wooden railings."

Alleva warned that an unskilled repairman may simply install a new floor over rotten framing and footings. "People will call us because they just had the floor replaced a year ago (by a handyman) and now it's all wavy," Alleva said. "If the floor is rotten, there's probably something going on underneath, too."

— EILEEN WATKINS

PAINT OR STAIN?

Although some homeowners leave their wooden porches unfinished, painting or staining natural wood — and even pressure-treated lumber — can help it last longer. Each type of finish has advantages and disadvantages.

Stain

- Will last longer than paint, because it doesn't peel
- Allows the grain of the wood to show through
- Is somewhat easier to apply than paint
- Needs to be completely stripped before you can refinish.

Paint

- Comes in a wide range of colors to coordinate with your home's exterior
- May eventually start to peel
- May need to be sanded before repainting, but probably not down to bare wood
- May need more careful application than stain, and more than one coat.

General Tips

- Use deck-quality paints and stains on an open or screened porch.
- Oil-based products are more durable, but emit fumes and take longer to dry.
- Latex dries more quickly, without fumes, but may start to peel sooner.
- Finish with a waterproof sealant to protect the surface from weather and wear.