

Combine windows, siding, insulation for appealing exterior barriers

By Tara Marion

There are many ways to increase the value of your home and, at the same time, reduce the amount of required maintenance and save on your energy bills.

Replacement windows are one improvement that provides both beauty and economy. Although most homeowners purchase replacement windows because their original windows have air leaks, don't operate properly or have only a single pane of glass, convenience is also an appealing feature.

"They're a totally different deal as far as maintenance is concerned," said Al Pringle, owner of Glass Company of Allegan, 1600 N. M-40.

Tilt-in cleaning enables homeowners to wash both sides of their windows from indoors, whereas conventional windows require homeowners to wash four pieces of glass—the inside and outside of the prime window, as well as the inside and outside of the storm window.

Not only are replacement windows easier to maintain, they're also more energy-efficient.

Replacement windows are actually two panes of thermal glass that are sealed together hermetically, meaning they're sealed airtight through fusion. This hermetic seal increases the window's R-factor (the standard measure of thermal effectiveness), improves sound-deadening effects and reduces energy consumption.

Argon gas is another method to increase the R-factor of glass and decrease the noise level inside the home.

Replacement windows are also available with low-emissivity (low-E) glass, which also increases their R-factor. "It's one option I truly believe in," Pringle said.

Additionally, Low-E glass blocks ultraviolet rays, which keeps carpet and drapes from fading.

With these innovations in replacement windows, it makes sense to replace your windows because it ends up saving you money. "Over 90 percent of the time, depending on the condition of your home, replacement windows will pay for themselves within three to five years," said Pringle.

Of course, additional insulation is an obvious improvement to make when installing replacement windows. Tom Krehn, manager of Carter Lumber Co., 1150 Lincoln Road, Allegan, suggested surrounding windows with insulation batts or spray foam, although he offered a warning about the latter option. "You've got to be careful with it," said Krehn. "If you put too much in and it expands, sometimes it will make your windows a little harder to open."

As Pringle mentioned, replacement windows only operate at optimal performance in conjunction with well-insulated walls, attics and ceilings. To guarantee energy efficiency, homeowners should pack insulation everywhere: walls, ceilings, attics, even in crawl spaces and between joists.

Before installing new vinyl or aluminum siding, contractors should also tack insulation to old wood siding to even it out.

"You're also giving yourself a thermal break, some vapor barrier and a little bit of insulation, which is always good," said Gary Howe, owner of Howe Aluminum Products Inc., 150 10th St., in Plainwell.

Although siding does provide a thermal barrier, Howe said the whole idea of siding is to beautify. "Siding is cosmetic. It's a finished product that's going to stay finished for many years."

Unlike painted wood siding that peels easily, aluminum and vinyl never need to be replaced and require minimal maintenance. Rather than waiting four to six years to clean it, homeowners should wash and buff their siding on a yearly basis.

"Give it a bath once a year and it's going to stay looking nice for a really long time," Howe said. "If you wait six years, and it gets filthy, you're going to have quite a chore on your hands."

In addition to these advantages, vinyl siding is fairly inexpensive and highly desirable. "You can definitely get your money back from it on resale," Howe said.

When vinyl siding appeared on the market 15 to 18 years ago, Howe said, contractors had problems preventing it from buckling when the temperature dropped in the winters, but it's come a long way as a result of plastics technology.

"That is not to say that you can't break a piece of vinyl, but it's very, very durable now, and that was the main problem with the vinyl 15 to 18 years ago," Howe said.

Although vinyl siding is more durable than aluminum siding, it's not as versatile in color. While aluminum is available in rich colors, like dark green and avocado gold, vinyl siding is only available in pastel colors.

Like replacement windows, contractors will install siding year-round. It's much more convenient for homeowners to have these products installed in the summer, but Howe said, "It's strictly preference to install siding before the weather gets too nasty. Siding installs are just as easy in December as they are in July."

Take a look at your home, both inside and out, to determine ways to make it more energy-efficient. In the process, you can also make it more attractive to you now and to potential buyers in the future.