

Wood or Composite Exterior Trim?

There are many new building products in the market but one with widespread usage in recent years is composite exterior trim. Although wood products are still readily available for this application the quality of many wood products has decreased so much it has accelerated the usage of these newer composite materials.

What are today's wood products?

Wood products have been used to build structures for thousands of years. More recently pine, spruce, cedar, and redwood have been used in modern wood framed construction. Unfortunately with increased demand the supply of good quality wood products has become increasingly a problem. Trees are being "forced" to grow more quickly using modern forestry methods resulting in many younger trees being used. This results in wood that is less durable and prone to absorb moisture. Whereas a board from a house built in the 1930's may have had 30 growth rings, it is not unusual to find only 3-4 growth rings in the same size board today. Growth rings are equivalent to one year's growth of a tree. The fewer the growth rings the weaker and more absorbent the wood is. It is also common practice today to make longer boards from combining lots of smaller ones. Again from the lack of larger older trees and the economics of not wasting materials. This causes weak spots in the boards where they are joined (fingered) together. Although wood product companies try to offset these weaknesses by using stronger more durable glues, and pre-treating wood for exterior exposure, none of this can equal the quality of older wood. The picture at the top of the next column shows an exterior grade primed pine trim board, originally well painted, rotting after only 5 years.

What are composite products?

Composites generally fall into two categories;

- Plastic polymer/wood combinations
- 100% plastic polymer blends



The advantages of composite materials for exterior use range from low or no moisture absorbency (thus not rotting), resistance to salt water (for structures near the water), to great paint adhesion (with the correct paint).

Of these the resistance to rot is the key factor composites are used today.

Which composite material should I use?

The product recommended depends on the final application. Polymer wood blends are used in composite decking for the most part but have one weak point, they contain wood fibers and can absorb moisture and swell over time.

Materials that are made of 100% PVC are very popular for exterior trim applications. Brands such as Azek and Klear supply many products for these applications. Heat can make all composites expand and "move" so care should be taken to attach them with stainless screws to limit this.

Should I paint my new composite trim?

The answer is almost always yes. Although not susceptible to water absorption and rot like wood composite trim, since they are made of plastic polymers, are susceptible to damage from UV rays of the sun. UV rays will break down the chemical bonds of plastics. Although UV stabilizers are put into composite products to give them protection from the sun it will

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only last so long unprotected. The good news is that once painted with the correct paint composite trim rarely needs to be painted again. The adhesion of today's 100% acrylic paints to composites is excellent. Never use oil based paint on composite trim as it will breakdown and dry out the composite materials over time.



Old growth board to left has many and tight growth rings (almost too small to see) while the new board to the right has few



In this photo, a finger joint, this is where smaller boards have been joined together resulting in a joint that will fail in time

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