

Arrol Gellner: Best windows: vinyl, aluminum or wood?

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Editor's note: This is the second of a two-part series.

Last time, we talked about choosing replacement windows that suit the style of your house, whether the type is casement, double-hung, slider or something more exotic. This time, we'll look at the different window materials available, and which choice is best for your project.

First, however, comes the fundamental question about window replacement: Does it really make sense for you? The answer, in many cases, is no.

If you're replacing your windows solely to lower your utility bills, for example, forget it. Energy loss through windows comprises only a small fraction of overall energy loss throughout the house, and you'll be far better off investing your money in additional attic insulation or even, in many cases, a more efficient furnace.

Even if you think your current windows are in terrible shape, you may wish to get an estimate on repairing rather than replacing them. This is especially advisable if you're lucky enough to have a prewar home with original wood windows. In this case, replacement windows will almost certainly detract from its market value.

Bear in mind that window replacement is generally an iffy investment, since it has a very long payback period. It's also one that can radically change your home's appearance, often for the worse.

If you've determined that replacement is for you, however, here's a rundown of the different window materials commonly available. Remember, we're not talking about the window type — double-hung, slider and so forth — but actual material.

Vinyl (polyvinyl chloride plastic, to be specific) is currently the ubiquitous material for replacement windows, but that alone doesn't make it an obvious choice. The moderate price can be attractive, but the jury is still out on vinyl's durability over the long haul. What's more, the thick, doughy frames typical of these windows are inappropriate to many home styles, and the slim choice of colors makes them easy to spot as replacements.

Aluminum windows are still available, but no longer carry the bargain price you may remember from years past. There's a good reason for this, however: They're now better built and far more efficient than the cheapie units of the 1960s. If your house was originally built with aluminum windows — most postwar houses from the mid-1950s

through the 1980s were — there's no question that new-generation aluminum windows will be your best aesthetic choice for replacement.

Wood windows, whether standard or clad, remain the premium choice for replacement. Clad windows, which variously have an external shell of aluminum or fiberglass to protect the wood elements from weathering, are represented as doing away with maintenance headaches. However, unlike plain wood windows, they can't be easily repaired or refinished if they're damaged.

You're also permanently stuck with the color of cladding you choose. Hence, you should weigh the premium you'll pay for clad windows against the occasional headache of repainting the standard wood version. Be prepared for sticker shock with either product, however — these windows are truly a lifetime investment.

As long as your budget allows it, the simplest rule of thumb for choosing window material is to replace like for like: aluminum with aluminum, wood with wood. In 10 years, after the latest window fad has come and gone, you'll be glad you did.

Read Arrol Gellner's blog at arrolgellner.blogspot.com, or follow him on Twitter: @ArrolGellner.

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