Reglazing Wood Windows

by Walter Jowers

Reglazing windows is one of those humble jobs. It's not like putting in a marble fireplace surround, or some double-helix walnut-and-titanium flying staircase, where you can step back when it's done and say, "Voila!" Reglazing is just one of those things that, every so often, has to be done.

Just about every old building has window problems that are attributable to worn-out window putty. Once old putty starts to crack, water can get to the window joints, where the wet end-grain expands and pushes the joints apart—and the paint off. If the windows are neglected long enough, the end grain—usually on the bottom rail of the window—starts to rot.

Well, you could go and tear out the windows and install "maintenance-free" replacements clad in genuine vinyl. All you have to do to install those miracles of science is wreck the interior and exterior finishes, and spend several thousand dollars of your client's money.

I'd rather reglaze.

The time to reglaze is before painting the exterior. Think of it as part of the prep work. The first thing you have to do is get the old cracked putty out. Sometimes, this is easy. When putty is really far gone, you can just touch the stuff with an old chisel, and it'll just fall right out. Other times—most times—the putty takes some persuading.

Persuading Putty

One thing about persuading putty: It takes some banging, and sometimes some heat. So, there's about a 50/50 chance that you'll break the window glass. On a museum house, where every pane of glass is considered "historic fabric," you might have to remove the sash, put it on a bench, and chip away at the putty ever so delicately. Or, if you just don't want to break any glass unless you have to, do what I do and use a little judgement about how much old putty you really want to take out. If some of the putty is in there so tight you can't knock it out fairly easily, leave it in there. Just put new putty in the areas where you did get the old putty out. Think of those lumps of old putty as plasterer's dots.

If, however, the glass is already broken (as is often the case), you might as well do a thorough job of removing the old putty. It'll make reglazing go that much faster.

Here's how I remove old window putty: First, I put on goggles and gloves to protect me from any glass that might fly. And I put on a respirator—the older I get, the less old-house funk (dust, putty, and who knows what else) I want in my lungs. Then I do this: Hold a chisel along a line down the middle of the putty. The idea is to split the old putty line in two. This works better than chiseling the putty off from front to back, or end to end, for two reasons. First, if you hit the chisel a little too hard, it bites into the wood window instead of glass. Second, the putty just comes out faster this way.

Once the putty line is split, you can usually dig most of it out fairly easily with your chisel. For stubborn spots, though, you have to soften the old putty up with heat. Using a heat gun is the fastest way, but also the method most likely to break the glass. In the job we photographed, the glass was already broken, so we just went ahead with the heat gun. If we had been trying to save the glass, we would have put a shield between the heat gun and the glass. A drywall knife works well for this. A safety note for heat gun use: Because the heat gun blows hot air, and because old windows generally have some cracks around them-that lead into the wall or window cavity—which might be full of dust, wasp nests, pieces of old wallpaper, and just about anything else—it's not impossible to start a fire with a heat gun. Common-sense precautions include not blowing hot air into obvious cracks, keeping a fire extinguisher handy, and checking the heated areas before you quit for the day.

An alternative heat device is a big (2 or 3 pound) electric soldering iron. It's slower than a heat gun, but it puts the heat directly on the putty, so there's much less chance of breaking the glass.

You can almost wipe away hot putty. Just run your chisel up under it and it should lift right off.

Once all the old putty's removed, prime the newly-exposed wood with a couple of coats of boiled linseed oil. This will keep the new putty from drying unevenly and will make the new putty last longer. Then do any necessary caulking, patching, or filling on the window sash.

Putting the Putty On

After your linseed-oil primer and all your patches have dried, it's time to reputty. If you're installing new glass, the best practice is to lay a thin bed of putty (I use DAP 33 glazing compound) on the bottom and sides of the window sash. Just lay it in there with your putty knife, keep it thin (say 1/16 inch) and as even as possible, and trim off any excess that gets squished to the inside of the glass. The putty bed creates a good weather seal, keeps the glass from rattling, and protects the glass somewhat from the shock of slamming. Secure any new glass with glazier's points. (I like the ones with the little U-shaped slots and tabs so you can push them in with a screwdriver.)

One little warning about window putty, particularly DAP-33: Buy it from a place that has some turnover, not some dusty little hardware store. I don't know what the shelf life of DAP-33 is, but once or twice, I've bought some that was as hard and yellow as old toenails, and would not work into a decent rope, let alone a decent bead.

Assuming you've bought good putty, here's how you work it: Roll a golf-ball-sized dollop of it between your hands until it forms a "rope" about as thick as your little finger. Then press it into place and trim it off with your knife, as shown in the photo. You can easily trim a piece to the necessary 45-degree angle, then add another rope until you get all the way across the window. Two or more pieces will join together nicely.

Let the putty cure enough to form a skin, then paint. The ideal paint job puts a tiny line of paint up over the putty and onto the glass, making a perfect weather seal. If you can't do this, at least get some paint on the glass and don't trim down into the putty when you scrape. ■

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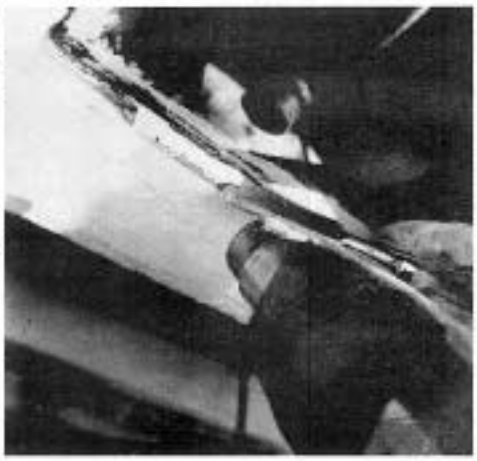
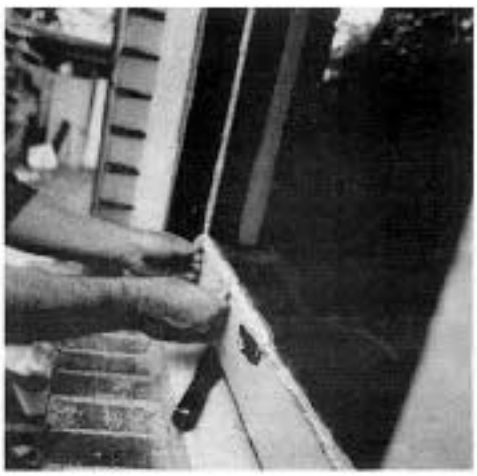
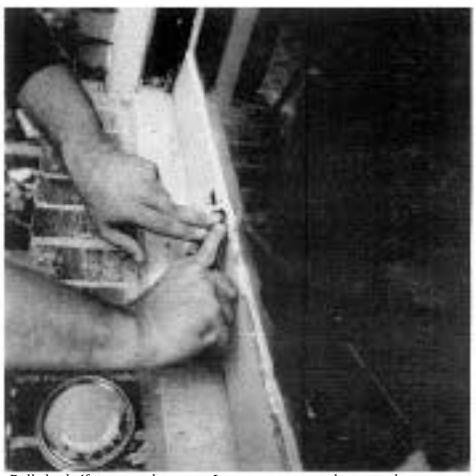
Chiseling out the old putty. Smack the putty in the middle to break it in half. Most of the stuff will just jump out.



Use a heat gun on stubborn spots, then scrape the putty out with a chisel. This is risky for glass you want to keep. You can use a putty knife as a heat shield. Alternate tool: 2- or 3-lb. soldering iron.



The glass is in place. After rolling the putty into a rope, work it into the newly-primed sash. (Prime first with boiled linseed oil.)



Pull the knife across the putty. Leave some space between the putty and the knife on the leading edge. Good fresh putty will make a nice 45-degree bead in one stroke.