

SHOOTING

TEXTURED

CEILINGS



Sprayed-on ceilings can save you time on labor-intensive prep, and they can hide a lot of sins.

by Duffy Gallagher

So the tapers did a lousy job, or the ceiling on your remodel job has too many imperfections, and patch and paint will take too long and cost too much. Sprayed-on textured ceilings, or "blown ceilings," may be just what you want. They can save you time on labor-intensive prep, and they can hide a lot of sins.

Prep the Ceiling Surface

Preparing for textured ceilings is easy. If you're putting up new drywall or working on old surfaces, nothing has to be quite perfect. You don't have to finish coat your tape; two coats of mud is enough. When you sand, the edges of the mud need to be just lightly touched. Don't waste your time feathering out the mud if it is not going to show once the textured ceiling is up. Abrupt changes in the plane of the ceiling (1/8 inch or more) will show up. But after the ceiling is sprayed, gradual changes in the ceiling are indistinguishable to the untrained eye.

Before spraying, stains in the ceiling need to be sealed with a shellac-based sealer or Bin (Wm. Zinsser & Co., Somerset, N.J.), and holes need to be filled. Any quick-dry spackle will do for filling holes, and in a pinch you can even knife on white latex caulk. Wait for the spackle or caulk to dry before spraying.

What You Will Need

Here are the items you'll have to line up before the job. You will need any stock ceiling spray gun with an adjustable orifice, and a matching plastic hopper (see Figure 1). These guns are driven by a medium-duty 6.4 cfm portable air compressor. You can rent the whole setup (compressor and gun) for about \$35 a day.

Because the dry texture mix is so fine when it is dry, you'll have to wear a respirator with a carbon-activated filter, and you should wear a spray hood while you spray. Keep your respirator on throughout the mixing and spraying process.

For masking, pick up rolls of two kinds of plastic, 4-mil and 2-mil. You'll also need masking paper and masking tape (more on this later). Bring along a good shop vac, though a standard household Hoover did us well on one job when our shop vac bit the dust.

Next, you will need the bags of "texture." Texture is a mixture of perlite and ver-

Spray on a texture mix when you need a quick and economical ceiling fix-up

miculite. It comes in 40-pound bags, which cost about \$15 each. A bag of texture will cover about 300 square feet, but this varies greatly with the thickness of the application and any additives you use.

Some painters spray the texture on with just water mixed in. Others feel that



Figure 1. The ceiling spray gun (right) has an adjustable orifice to accommodate different consistencies of the texture. The gun (top) is fitted with a matching plastic hopper that holds the wet texture.



the texture needs an adhesive additive. We feel it is best to include a bonding/adhesive additive with any textured ceiling. There are two kinds of additive adhesives. First, you can add 25 pounds of vinyl joint compound per bag of texture (Gold Bond's PPP compound works very well), or you can add latex paint. Not only does paint give you extra bonding, but it can give your ceiling color and gloss as well. If you add paint, it is a one-for-one swap for water added. For each gallon of added paint, you can reduce the water in the mix by one gallon.

Next, you will need a source of water, a large container (a plastic 30-gallon garbage can works nicely), a hammer drill with the largest stir attachment you can find, and a single gallon bucket.

Finally you have to find two people who aren't afraid to wear "An-ugly-man-for-an-ugly-job" tee shirts, because spraying ceilings is like standing in the middle of an oatmeal monsoon—everything that you wear gets coated. It is messy work.

Getting Started

The first thing you do is to mix the texture. Don't waste your time moving the furniture or masking out the room before you mix up the texture, because the texture has to set for between 30 and 45 minutes before you can use it. During that time you can prep the room.

Next, put on your respirator. Measure three and a half gallons of water—lukewarm if possible, but not hot—into the empty large container. Fill your gallon bucket with water and put it aside. Slowly add the bag of texture mix to the water, all the while mixing with the hammer drill and attachment. A lot of fine powder is going to float up during this process, and you don't want to breathe this. Add texture powder until the texture absorbs all the water, and mix with the hammer drill until it is lump-free. When it is lump-free, add the measured gallon of water in small increments until the mixture in the large container is about the consistency of hot breakfast oatmeal just before you add your milk. It should be a little grainy. Chances are you will end up using about four gallons of water all told.

Don't mix it too thin. It is too thin if it is soupy or if water rises to the surface. Add more mix if this is the case. You can always correct mixture that is too thick even after you have sprayed it on the ceiling, because it is easy to scrape off with a wide putty knife while it is wet. The mixture in the spray gun hopper can be put back in the large container, and water can be added until the mixture is the right consistency for spraying.

Let the texture stand for 30 to 45 minutes.

Masking

With the textured setting up, it's time to mask. Masking is best done with two workers. Cover the floor with 4-mil plastic. If you can cover the entire floor with one piece of plastic, this is best. Simply lay it down, there is no need to secure it in any way. Cut the plastic 2 feet long in every direction. Though the plastic will bunch at the walls, and seem like a waste, this extra plastic will make clean up simple.

Next, cut the 2-mil plastic so it covers the wall and dangles 2 feet down onto the floor, overlapping the 4-mil plastic. Tape one edge of the plastic to the wall 1 inch from the ceiling line. Use 3-inch-long strips of 2-inch-wide painter's masking tape. Apply these strips of tape

every 4 feet. (You use painter's masking tape because it isn't as sticky as regular masking tape, and it is less likely to pull the paint from the wall when you remove the plastic during clean up.)

You want to use as few pieces of plastic on the walls as possible. If you can cover two walls with one big piece of the plastic, that's great. Whatever you do, don't end a run of plastic in the corner of a room, because it is hard to seal that seam. Wherever wall-covering plastic meets, overlap it by three feet. You don't need to seal the vertical seam created when the wall-covering plastic meets.

In effect, you are creating a large plastic bag in which to spray. But don't forget to put one of your seams by the door to give you access to the room. (One day, by mistake, I sealed a new worker of mine into a room—he thought it was some kind of joke.)

Take 2-inch-wide painter's masking tape, and mask the 1-inch gap between the ceiling and the top of the plastic that covers the wall. Bring the masking tape down onto the plastic to help secure and seal it. When you demask, take this strip of tape off first. Sometimes it will pull the plastic down with it, but don't worry as long as it all falls on the floor plastic.

Cover ceiling fixtures with tape and masking paper. Leave no gaps. When you clean up, you will pull all the wall plastic down into the center of the room, and pick it up by gathering the corners of the floor plastic into a bundle. The bundle goes to the dumpster. The most expensive part of the job is the plastic.

Spraying

Go back to your texture mix, and remix it thoroughly with the hammer drill. Attach the spray gun's hopper to the gun and tighten the pipe clamp that holds it in place (see Figure 2). Attach



Figure 2. The spray gun's hopper is attached to the top of the gun and held on with a clamp. These guns are driven by a medium-duty 6.4 cfm portable air compressor. You can rent the whole setup (compressor and gun) for about \$35 a day.

the gun to the air-compressor hose. (The air compressor should be kept just outside the plastic tent so you can bring all of your hose inside.) Using the gallon bucket—emptied of water—scoop the texture from the large container and fill the hopper with the wet texture.

Set the nozzle control disk on the spray gun to the smallest opening that allows the largest chunks of the mix to pass. Turn on the air compressor. Point the gun at the ceiling at a 45-degree angle, from a distance of 2 to 4 feet, and pull the trigger. This will blow the mix on the ceiling, where it will stick. Don't be surprised when an oatmeal rain falls on you, but don't worry, the vast majority of the mixture is right where you want it, on the ceiling.

When applying, swing your arms in a wide oval, and walk through the room spraying the ceiling. Don't try to spray continuously—your arms will tire quickly anyway—short bursts of the trigger will do. Be sure to spray completely around fixtures.

Spray until the ceiling is completely covered, and no longer visible. Don't backtrack and coat beyond that simple covering. You can always respray undersprayed parts, but areas that are oversprayed will sag very quickly or hang down like stalactites. While wet, the mixture can easily be scraped off with a wide putty knife and the area immediately resprayed. Be especially careful not to overspray in corners, so use short bursts of the trigger in those areas.

It's difficult to patch a textured ceiling once it is dry, so scrape off bad areas and spray them while the rest of the ceiling is wet or moist. If you try to spray patches onto dry texture, the add-on patches will show up as being thicker than the rest. Sometimes the old stuff is discolored.

If the gun clogs, which is rare, take it off the air compressor and hopper and run water through it. If lumps caused the problem, restir your batch.

One more hint: wear plain-soled shoes. The texture will wad up on your shoes and clog any textured soles. Plain-soled shoes can be wiped clean with a wide putty knife.

The best system of spraying is to have no pattern at all. Apply randomly. When you are done, allow the ceiling to dry for 30 minutes.

It only takes one person to spray, and that same sprayer can load the hopper. So the second fellow on the job can be sent to cut plastic and set up for the next room, or clean up the previous room you sprayed. A 20x15 ceiling should take about 30 minutes to spray after all the set up and masking is complete.

Clean Up

After the texture is dry (30 minutes or so), rip down the strip of tape that goes between the ceiling line and the wall-cover plastic. This leaves a nice clean line at ceiling level. Next, strip the wall-covering plastic and bunch it into the middle of the floor. Make a bundle of this mess and dispose.

Any mix that got on the wall or furniture can be removed with a wet sponge. Any on the floor or carpet should be allowed to dry completely, and it will vacuum up easily.

Clean the hopper and gun with soap and water, using a hose to run water through the gun and nozzle.

Leftover mix in the large container can be covered and reused the next day. Cut a circle of plastic and lay it directly on top of the mix. To reuse, add a little water and remix with the hammer drill. If you are doing a lot of carry-over from day to day, always add the water first to day-old texture before adding new dry mix. Don't add dry mix to the standing wet texture.

Textured ceilings can turn a sorry-looking ceiling into a good-looking one and do so quickly and cheaply. The material is relatively inexpensive, the cleanup easy (if you've masked properly), and the labor time much less for patching and painting. You can even recycle the plastic used for masking (only with non-adhesive textures) by washing it with water, though this is labor intensive. For the most part, the entire operation can neatly fit in the back of a station wagon or a corner of a pick-up truck bed. ■

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