DOING Vinyl Right

Great-looking trim is the key to a quality siding job

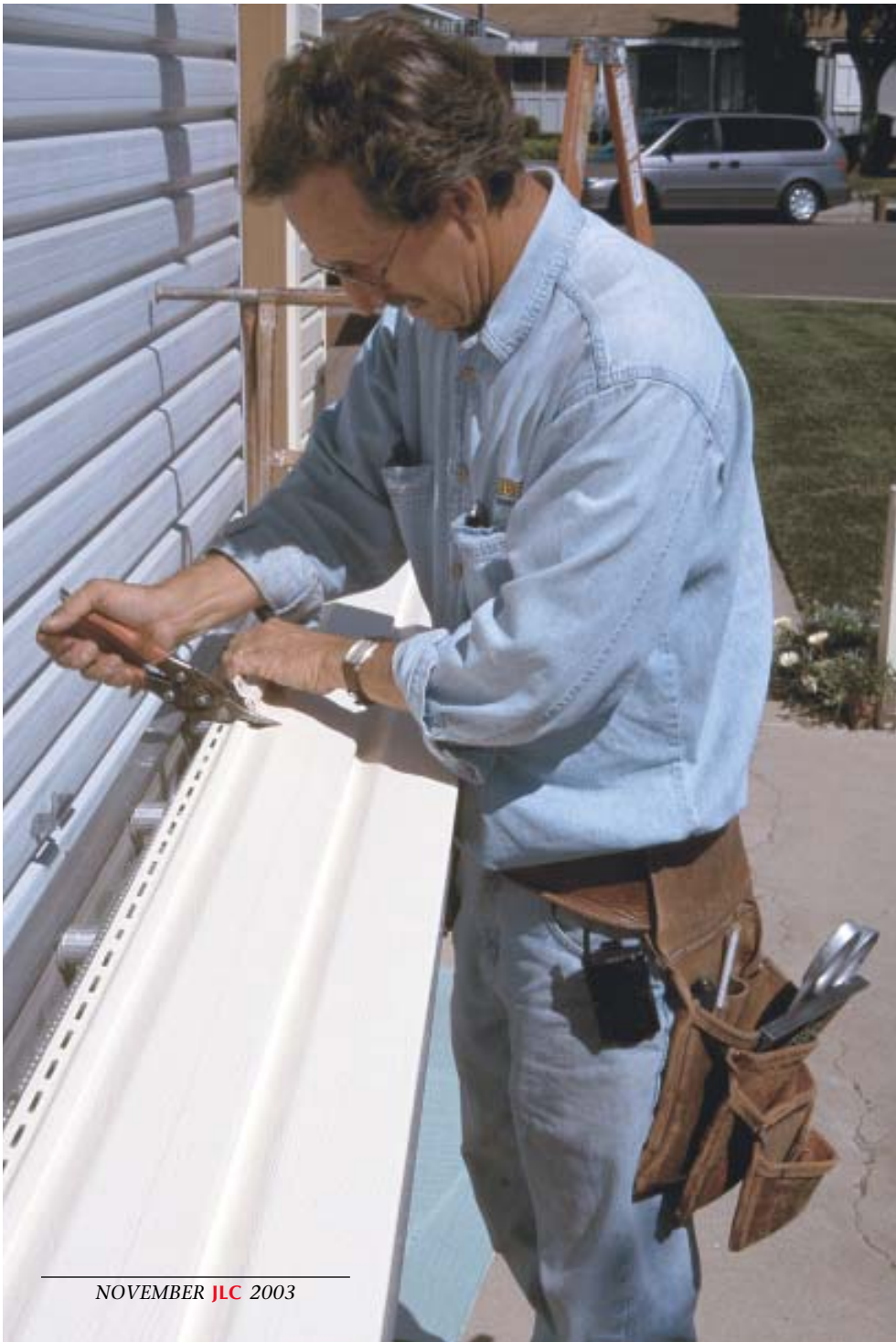
I'm a contractor in southern New England. My business, the Storm Tite Company, installs replacement doors and windows, porch enclosures, and gutters, but our specialty is vinyl siding. There are a lot of older houses in our area, many of which feature extensive trim and ornamental woodwork. We have a reputation for knowing how to apply vinyl without changing the character of structures that were originally sided with wood, so we're often hired for those types of demanding jobs.

Why Installation Matters

Most builders and homeowners are already familiar with the benefits of vinyl. Vinyl siding is durable, installs easily, and resists fading, denting, and scratching. Once it's installed, it requires no maintenance other than an occasional wash with a garden hose — a major selling point for modern homeowners who don't have the time or patience to scrape and paint every few years.

When good siding goes bad. Like any building product, though, vinyl can be installed well or badly. Unfortunately, you don't have to look hard to find ugly siding jobs. But the siding itself is seldom to blame. A lot of siding jobs go bad because an inexperienced installer overdrives the nails, preventing the siding from expanding and contracting

by Ed Ladouceur



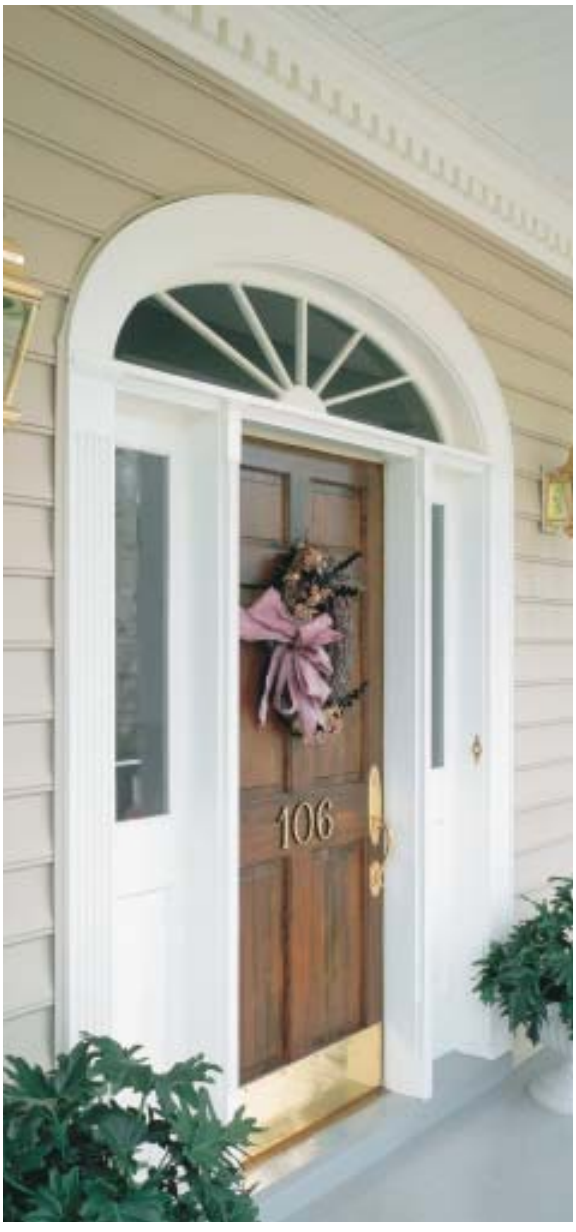


Figure 1. Unlike the poorly detailed vinyl siding of the past, today's siding and trim are available in a wide variety of patterns and styles, including these products from CertainTeed (next page) and Alside (this page).

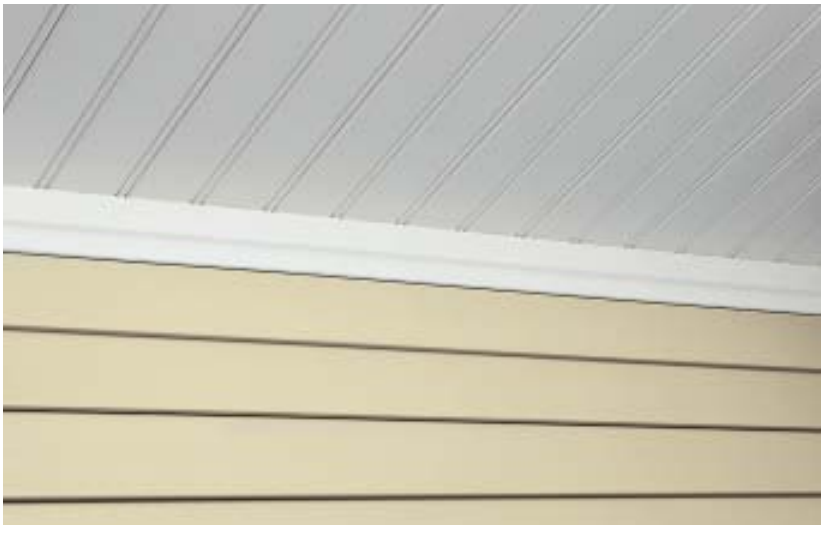
with changes in temperature. Even a few overdriven nails can cause siding to crack or buckle.

An even more widespread problem is that many siding installers care more about getting the job done quickly than about the appearance of the finished product. Far too many applicators make a habit of tearing off projecting trim and architectural detail and burying other important design elements under the new siding. That approach allows the contractor to do the job for a rock-bottom price, but the featureless, flat-looking exteriors that result are an embarrassment to the industry.

Siding Choices

In the mid-1960s, when vinyl siding began to compete with aluminum, few colors and patterns were available, and trim options were pretty much limited to J-channel and skinny inside- and outside-corner posts. But today, there's a wide range of siding and trim products on the market (see Figure 1). That range of choice is especially useful when a homeowner wants to re-side an existing house while keeping the look of the original exterior. So many types of siding are available that we can often come up with a close match for the original wood siding.

Going with the grain. The differences between sidings can be subtle, and we'll choose from one manufacturer or another depending on the effect we're after. For example, both Mastic and CertainTeed make cedar shingle siding from polypropylene. To my eye, the grain of the Mastic version, Cedar Discovery, looks like red cedar. CertainTeed's Cedar Impressions, on the other hand, looks more like



white cedar to me.

The texture of lap siding also varies from one manufacturer and product line to the next. You can get perfectly smooth siding or siding with an exaggerated rough-sawn look. For many applications, I recommend a lightly textured "brush stroke" finish that gives a convincing representation of painted wood.

Vinyl and Aluminum Trim

Even more than the siding itself, trim is what makes or breaks a siding installation. It's the first thing you notice when you look at a house, and if it looks wrong or awkward, the overall effect will be wrong.

Vinyl corners. We finish both inside and outside corners with manufactured vinyl trim. As with the siding itself, we offer our clients a wide range of choices. But because my customers hire me to provide a good-looking job, I don't hesitate to offer my own opinion, especially if they're headed in what I think is the wrong direction.

For example, a number of manufacturers now offer wide, fluted corner trim. This can look great on a two-story colonial, but I sometimes have to talk people out of using it on a ranch house, where a simpler, narrower corner is more appropriate.

The bottom line is that if you try to make a house into something it's not, it just looks goofy. I've occasionally passed up a job when the customer was determined to do something that I knew wouldn't look right. An ugly installation makes you look bad, even if the owner is happy with it.

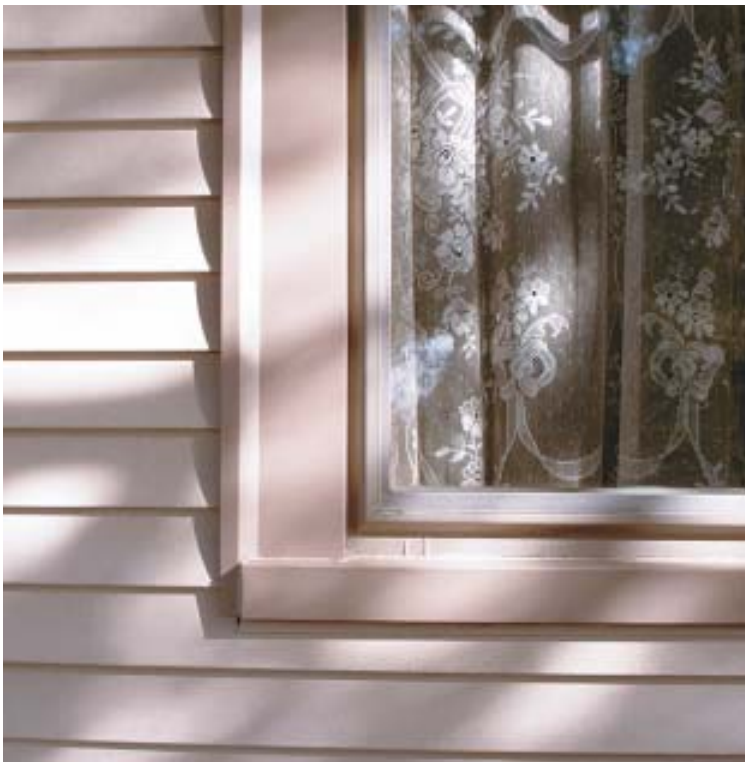


Figure 2. The vertical leg of this site-bent window casing stock is designed to be fastened to the wall with stainless-steel nails that are concealed by the siding. Mitered corners where the side and head casing meet are secured with a single stainless-steel face nail. The lower horizontal leg is dimensioned to wrap around the window casing and be caulked in place (above). The base of the side casing is caulked to the aluminum-clad sill to provide a clean-looking "J-less" window surround (left).

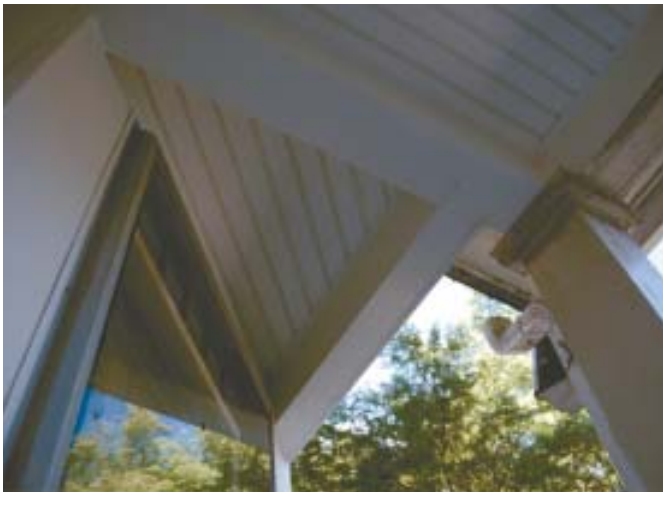


Figure 3. Beaded vinyl soffit has been applied to this porch ceiling (left); the headers are clad with prepainted aluminum coil stock. The tapered square columns will be refinished with paint. Vinyl's natural flexibility is useful for many trim applications. This curved soffit closely resembles the original version, which was made from tongue-and-groove boards (right).

Site-bent aluminum. Although we use vinyl corner trim, we make most of our other trim from site-bent .019 aluminum coil stock. We buy prepainted aluminum from Alcoa because it comes in a wide range of colors that match perfectly with the Alcoa vinyl siding we most often use. We also use colored stainless-steel nails and tinted caulk from Alcoa.

I don't like the look of J-channel around door and window casings, so we use a method that makes it unnecessary. Our "J-less" trim has an integral channel to receive the siding (Figure 2). Not all portable brakes have the ability to make the tight reverse bends required; we use the Pro-III Port-O-Bender from Tapco (800/521-7567, www.tapcoint.com). Another big advantage to our method is that we're not limited by the width or style of available vinyl trim. We can bend up whatever we need for any application.

Figure 4. A well-thought-out combination of polypropylene shingles, vinyl siding, site-bent aluminum trim, and original wood trim gives little indication that this older house is not sided entirely with wood (left). The eaves brackets and carved fascia with its ornamental "canoes" are original. Soffits are vinyl, while the frieze assembly and cornice above the wood fascia are aluminum (below).

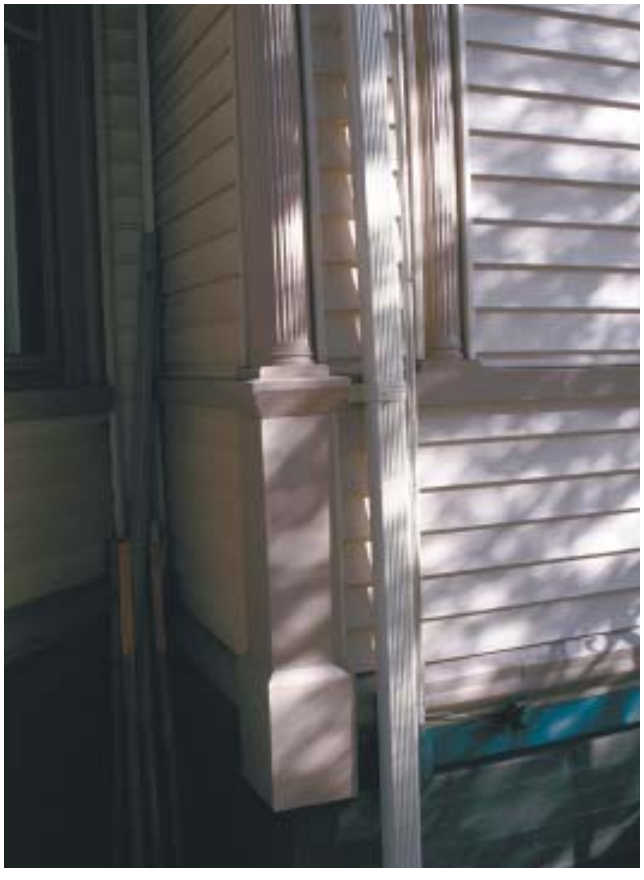


Figure 5. Like the rest of the wood trim on this period structure, these wood columns were repainted before the siding was applied. The column base and adjacent horizontal trim are aluminum.

Saving existing trim. Site-bent aluminum is ideal for rake and eaves trim on older houses, because it can be customized to compensate for out-of-square or out-of-level conditions. We use vinyl for soffits and porch ceilings (Figure 3, previous page).

Fitting the siding, soffit, and aluminum around existing wood trim on an older house can take a lot of time. But if the job is done right, it can be difficult to tell where the wood ends and the vinyl or aluminum begins, even at close range (Figure 4). As with doors and windows, minimizing the use of J-channel goes a long way toward maintaining a convincingly wood-like appearance. In some areas, though, there's no way to avoid it (Figure 5).

Painting. When original wood details are left exposed, some limited areas of the house will still need to be painted periodically. We don't do painting or general carpentry, so it's up to the homeowner to make sure that any exposed details are in good repair and painted before we come to install the siding. Any good paint store can computer-match the trim paint to the color of the siding.

Ed Ladouceur *is president of the Storm Tite Company in Warwick, R.I.*