

Natural painting tips

Tips for using natural paints on walls and ceilings

Painting, whether it is new walls or freshening up the existing colour, can transform a room. The experience can be enjoyable or difficult. It all comes down to preparation. While the results can be similar, each product has its own little intricacies.

Firstly though, why bother painting it yourself? It is important to consider the time that it may take you, as often you can start with something small in mind that ends up turning out a lot bigger than anticipated.

Only undertake the project if you have the time and the inclination to

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prepare, use and maintain the surfaces accordingly. Don't think that it's just a matter of applying the paint... In saying that though, often people are pleased to have undertaken the project themselves and are proud of their accomplishments.

Considerations

Firstly, you need to decide which product to use. Does the thought of

inhaling an assortment of chemicals put you off, or have you not even thought along those lines? Do you perhaps like the 'new paint' smell? There are many good and not so good paints on the market.

There has been much hype about VOCs (volatile organic compounds) in paints, where some manufacturers would like you to believe that 'no VOC' paint is better for your health. This is not quite true – there are synthetic and plant-based VOCs – and certainly not as clear cut as you are lead to believe. If it was, would we have to ban oranges as they have a high 'natural' VOC content? *See sidebar next page.*

One of the major considerations for using natural paints is (but not limited to) the health aspect. Typically, natural paint suppliers have a full ingredient listing; this is the only way you can truly know if a product is safe to use or not. Natural paints also require less energy to produce and are manufactured with ingredients predominantly found in nature. They also require fewer additives than their synthetic counterparts.

If you are painting new walls and ceilings made of plaster, render, stone or earth, you will need to consider and maintain the vapour permeability qualities of the surface, therefore it is advantageous to paint with a natural product that is also permeable to vapour.

Preparation

Although time consuming, you must pay particular attention to the preparation of various surfaces to ensure it is completed correctly the first time. Don't start painting if it is either too cold or in extreme heat. Both scenarios have their own problems. Just remember, the better the preparation the easier it is to paint.

Natural paints are safe for kids to use.



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Remove as much furniture as possible. Take down and remove light fittings, or wrap them well with a non-pervious material (like plastic, unfortunately). Having a room that is empty of any furniture or fittings is much easier to work in, however this is not always possible due to space constraints.

Before you go ahead and start sanding surfaces, check what type of paint is already there. If you suspect it is lead paint or the surface is asbestos, seek professional advice. If removing lead paint, it is advisable not to sand but to use a paint remover; there are even natural paint removers. Rather than having the dust fly everywhere (and it is impossible to vacuum all the tiny particles) paint remover will create a soft paste-like surface that you can easily scrape off with no dust. See sidebar below.

If the original paint is flaking or minor cracks are visible, repair these at least a day or two prior to the day of painting. Sand with fine sandpaper ensuring the surface is flat and even. This may be completed by hand, however using an

orbital sander linked up to a vacuum works much faster, gives a more even finish and stops that fine plaster dust getting into every nook and cranny. If the surface is uneven, this will always show through the paint, no matter how good the paint or painter is. Many types of filler require their own time to dry and cure prior to sanding back. Ensure the surfaces to be painted are dust and grease free.

Tape up around skirting, doors etc. unless you have a very good steady hand and can cut in easily. Check on the type of tape you use, as you don't want to lift off old paint or varnish. Remove it immediately after you finish painting.

Ensure you have enough drop sheets to protect floor coverings. Old cotton sheets are a practical alternative as you can easily wash after use and reuse for other purposes. Thin plastic drop sheets are not ideal; while cheap, they tear easily with ladders, move at every little breeze and are difficult to reuse.

Thorough preparation is the key to a successful and long lasting paint job.



Volatile Organic Compounds

According to regulatory bodies, VOCs are organic compounds that readily volatilise under atmospheric conditions and that react with sunlight to generate smog. Thus, from a regulator's point of view, compounds are VOCs only if they contribute to certain types of outdoor pollution.

In the green building community, we think of VOCs as contributors to indoor air quality (IAQ) problems – and the amounts of VOCs is often our only IAQ metric for a product. But there are lots of compounds that meet a chemist's definition of VOC but are not photoreactive so are not defined as VOCs by regulators. Some of these chemicals – including formaldehyde, methyl chloride, and many other chlorinated organic compounds – have serious health and ecological impacts.

Some VOCs have potentially serious health effects, while others are relatively benign. And the amount or type of VOCs that are in a product may or may not be a good indication of what is released into the air – some react with ozone or with other compounds and morph into something new as they volatilise.

The label describing VOC levels in grams per litre on a can of paint indicates the paint's contribution to smog formation. For indoor air quality purposes, we should look to results from chamber-testing protocols that analyse key VOCs individually.

Source: Environmental Building News Volume 16 Number 7 – July 2007. EBN is published by BuildingGreen, an independent USA publishing company committed to bringing their members accurate, unbiased, and timely green design information. www.buildinggreen.com

Lead and asbestos

Lead

Lead-based paint is most likely to be found on window frames, doors, skirting boards, kitchen and bathroom cupboards, exterior walls, gutters, metal surfaces and fascias. It can also be found on interior walls, ceilings and areas with enamel paint. Pink and red primer both contain lead, so you should think twice before disturbing any surface which has had any of these paints applied.

Paint removal of lead-based paint by blasting, burning, dry scraping, dry sanding and using power tools creates the most serious dangers because the particles are small enough to be inhaled or deposited in furnishings or carpet, making complete removal extremely difficult. See more at...

www.environment.gov.au > Search for:

'Lead Alert – The Six Step Guide to Painting your Home

Asbestos

Where ACM (asbestos-containing material) cannot be removed and must be sealed, painted, coated or cleaned, there may be a risk to health.

If treatment of ACM is considered essential, a method that does not disturb the matrix of the material needs to be used. An airless sprayer at low pressure is preferred to rollers or brushes on exposed (or unsealed) asbestos, as rollers and brushes may cause abrasion/damage and result in fibres being released from the surface of the material. Under no circumstances can ACM be water-blasted or dry-sanded in preparation for painting, coating or sealing. See more at...

www.asbestos.vic.gov.au



Above L-R: New walls and existing dark paintwork are transformed by the application of natural paints.

Materials

Once you have decided which paint and colour to use, work out the area to be painted in square metres; use this along with the coverage guidelines of your chosen paint to work out quantities, bearing in mind the number of coats you would like to apply. Be slightly on the generous side rather than conservative, as there is nothing more annoying than running out of paint when you are nearly finished a job. If you are mixing your own paint tints, remember to keep a record of the ratio handy for another time. Typically natural paints do not contain preservatives and come in various tints that you must mix into the paint when required.



For a smooth finish to walls and ceiling, a wool or microfibre roller will be your best choice. If you would like some structure and texture to your walls, then a long nap roller is better. Using a wide enough paint tray to fit the roller will allow the excess paint to be easily removed from the roller.

Priming

To prime or not to prime? The big question. On new surfaces, definitely yes. On surfaces that are already painted but need a refresh? Priming here will be dependent on how good the finish is, the colour you are painting over and what the new colour is.

If your walls are white, in good condition and will be painted over again with white (or a light colour), then generally you do not need to prime. Remember though that priming prepares the substrate for the paint and helps to maximise the coverage too. If painting over a dark colour, then while priming may not be necessary if the surface is in good condition, be prepared to apply three coats rather than two. This is necessary with any paint, natural or otherwise.

It is imperative that the surface, primed or not primed, is in a sound condition, even and dust free. If you are

Painting using a roller.

unsure of what kind of paint is on the wall, do a test patch with the new paint to ensure that there is good adhesion.

Painting

Open and stir the paint well, even if it is only white. Remember to stir occasionally while painting to make sure all the ingredients and pigments are mixed thoroughly. If the paint has been stored for a while and it feels lumpy, it may be an idea to put it through a sieve or stocking first.

Lightly wetting a new roller stops too much paint absorption into the roller. Load the roller and remove excess paint on the roller by slowly rolling it over the ridges of the paint tray.

It is accepted painting practice to always start with the ceiling, as it results in splashes everywhere! Cut in with a brush around the perimeter where the ceiling meets the walls, as well as around any light fittings, fixtures etc. It does not need to be too wide a cut, enough (around 50mm) to allow the roller to overlap this area without touching the walls. Roll the paint on gently from one end of the ceiling to the other using long even strokes, overlapping and blending with each pass.

For walls, cut in around doors, windows etc. Load up the roller and paint gently and evenly, from top to bottom, overlapping each roll as per ceilings.

With natural paints, do not re-roll wet paint as this will remove some of the paint off the wall.

Allow to dry. Typically the paint will be lighter when dry than it is when it is freshly painted and wet, so assess once it is completely dry. Ventilate well to assist in the drying process. Allow a good 12–24 hours in-between coats. Natural paints do not have any synthetic dryers and it is not advisable to paint while even slightly damp.

Tinting the paint

Natural paints do not contain any synthetic preservatives so you need to obtain the pigment and the white base separately. The pigment may either be in powder form or a paste. While some may find this tedious, many prefer this method, not only from the health aspect of no preservatives but because they can let their imagination go wild to create new shades of colour. One thing to remember though, is that once you have worked out your colour you must keep a note of the *exact* ratio of pigment to paint used if you want to ensure that all your batch mixes produce the same shade. This will come in handy when you want to either repair or touch up an area, or if you don't mix enough to start with.

The first point of call in choosing the colour is a colour chart to get an indication of what is actually available. Natural pigments are often earthy in colour and at times you may not be able to obtain a specific vibrant colour of choice due to the fact that it is simply not available in nature. Always test in a small area first, as when the paint is wet it is much darker than when it dries.

Once the colour and the ratio have been established the fun begins. The pigment is added to the correct amount of white (dependant on your chosen shade). Then to ensure all the pigment supplied is mixed through the paint, place some of the white paint into the pigment jar or tin, mix and then empty into the paint. Once you are happy that all the pigment (which is usually heavier than the white paint) is in the white paint, mix thoroughly. Often the easiest way to do this is with a mixer drill bit at the end of a small drill.

Further tips

When not using the paint, always replace the lid to avoid the paint forming a crust as it dries. At the end of the day it is a good idea to also place a piece of cling film over the surface of the paint. This can



Earth pigments may be mixed to various ratios into the white paint to achieve a multitude of colours and shades.

quite easily be removed the next day and will help ensure the paint does not dry out, especially if there is only a small amount of paint left in the container. Remember to keep some of the mixed paint for touch ups and the 'what ifs' later on.

To save time and paint, rather than wash the rollers each time, wrap tightly in cling film or seal in plastic bags, ensuring they are airtight. This way the rollers will remain moist for reuse the next day. It may be beneficial to wait an extra day before cleaning the equipment, to allow for a quick check of the dried paint so see that nothing has been missed and if need be, you can easily carry out any touch ups.

When at long last the job is finished, soak the paint brushes and rollers in water. This helps dissolve and dislodge the paint. If you replace the water a few times, and if the paints are truly natural with no synthetic additives, the water can actually be used on the garden.

It is important to note that due to the lack of chemicals, natural paints do require a few weeks to cure to achieve maximum protection before they can be cleaned. Also, even though natural paints are non toxic, it is always best to ventilate well, then sit back and enjoy your handiwork for many years to come.

Painting can be a very rewarding and satisfying project, inexpensively transforming the whole look and feel of a room. Careful preparation and selection of the tools to assist with the

project can also support in making the experience more enjoyable. Ensuring you follow manufacturer's instructions is very important, especially when using natural products. Draw on their wealth of experience whether verbally, or from websites and videos. Using these products is not any more difficult, however experienced 'tips' can help avoid unnecessary frustrations and slip-ups. That way, you and your family get to enjoy the beautiful new look with the added benefit of knowing you have positively contributed to a healthy, sustainable and eco friendly environment. ♦

Next issue, Angela shares some painting tips about using natural oil paint on windows, doors and architraves.

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Links & resources

♦ Livos Australia

Supplies a large range of plant based non-toxic products for various surfaces. The products are biologically degradable, sustainable and are harmless, even in direct contact with humans, animals and plants.

03 9762 9181, www.livos.com.au

♦ TOB 149 Oct/Nov 2008

Article by Angela Petruzzi titled 'Natural paints,' discussing the choices available.

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