REFINISHING WESTERN RED CEDAR SIDING - CLEARS, SEMI-TRANSPARENT STAINS, BLEACHING OILS

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When the surface of finished Western Red Cedar siding (let's call it 'cedar') is exposed outdoors, it will eventually deteriorate in appearance. Refinishing is required when the surface starts to show blotchy discoloration caused by weathering, extractives or mildew. Natural clear finishes that allow the cedar grain to show through will require refinishing usually in 1 or 2 year cycles. Semi-transparent penetrating stains on cedar will usually require refinishing on a 3 to 6 year cycle depending on the roughness of the cedar surface, how much stain was originally applied, and the color of the stain. Proper cleaning and surface preparation is essential to the successful refinishing of cedar. **Power washing should never be used** to clean cedar siding because this process can damage the wood surface fibers and make it difficult for the finish to penetrate.

So what can go wrong with a natural or stain finish on cedar? With normal exposure, dirt and other foreign materials can accumulate on the surface. There can be discoloration from mildew and other staining organisms. In very humid, warm climates, mold, algae and moss can sometimes grow on the cedar surface. With the natural weathering process from sunlight and rain, fading and deterioration of the finish and the cedar usually occurs.

Refinishing cedar

It is extremely difficult to maintain the original natural look of cedar exposed to the weather. It is even more difficult to try to restore the cedar to its original appearance. The more natural the finish, the more difficult it may be to retain the original color of the cedar. There are some commercial brighteners, or restorers that have had some success on cedar but only when they are used on cedar where all the old finish has weathered away or been removed. Oxalic acid products are brighteners that have had some success when used on cedar. A warning: oxalic acid is toxic and should be handled and used with care. Always follow manufacturer's recommendations and instructions.

Mildew, a common cause of graying and discoloration of cedar, can be removed by using commercial mildew cleaners or a liquid household bleach containing 5 percent sodium hypochlorite. Normally the bleach is diluted with water. For especially dirty wood, a detergent safe for use with household bleach is sometimes added to the bleach solution. Just be sure that the detergent does not contain ammonia AND is recommended for use with liquid household bleach. Since some of these cleaners may remove the weathered cedar surface, care should be taken to avoid damaging the surface. Also, aggressive scrubbing with a caustic cleaner can actually remove wood from the surface and these cleaners should be used with caution, if at all.

Mechanical cleaning methods like sanding can be effective as a means for removing unwanted coats of previously applied finishes but it can seriously damage the surface of the cedar. Sanding should be considered as a last resort to be used only when other cleaning methods have failed and must be done with great care to minimize damaging the cedar surface. Although power washing is the mechanical method for cleaning and restoring cedar often favored by contractors, power

washers can seriously damage cedar surfaces. As mentioned earlier, this type of cleaning is NOT recommended for cedar.

Oils finishes can be refinished following the suggestions given below for water-repellent preservatives.

Water-repellent preservatives can be renewed by a simple cleaning of the old surface with a stiff bristle brush and water followed by an application of a new coat of finish. In some cases, a mild scrubbing with a detergent followed by rinsing with water is appropriate. In more drastic cases, mildew cleaners must be used. The second coat of water-repellent preservative will last longer than the first because more can be applied as it penetrates into small surface checks which open as the wood weathers. The rougher the surface, the more finish can be applied, and the longer the service life.

Semi-transparent oil-based penetrating stains are relatively easy to refinish. Excessive scraping and sanding are not required. Simply use a stiff bristle brush to remove all surface dirt, dust, and loose wood fibers, and then apply a new coat of stain. The second coat of penetrating stain often lasts longer than the first because more can be applied as it penetrates into small surface checks which open as wood weathers. Note that steel wool and wire brushes should never be used to clean surfaces to be finished with semi-transparent stains or water-repellent preservatives because small iron deposits may be left behind. These deposits can react with certain naturally occurring water-soluble extractives in cedar to yield dark blue-black stains on the surface.

Weathering stains and bleaching oils are refinished the same way as the semi-transparent oil-based penetrating stains.

Semi-transparent latex stains act more like very thin paints and may require more extensive surface preparation (scraping, sanding, etc.) before being refinished. Care should be taken to not build up any film thickness by using too frequently. Manufacturers' instruction should be followed carefully.

Final Thoughts

Remember, when buying any natural or stain finish for cedar, it is always best to use the top-of-the-line of a supplier you know and trust. Also, things are changing in the world of wood finishes and many traditional oil-based finishes that use petroleum solvents (sometimes called solvent-borne) may not be available in some areas of the country. More and more exterior finishes for cedar are latex (water-borne). New natural finish formulations are being introduced for cedar so be sure to check with your local finish supplier for the newest products.