

Richmond by Kaycan  
(vinyl lap siding,  
\$4.00 per sq. ft.)

HardiePlank by  
James Hardie (fibre  
cement, \$2.50 per sq. ft.)

# an outside job

Resistech by Maibec  
(wood composite,  
\$3.45–\$3.70 per sq. ft.)

Modern by Maibec  
(wood, \$4.35–\$4.50  
per sq. ft.)

Board & Batten by  
Maibec (wood,  
\$4.50–\$4.75 per sq. ft.)

With so many kinds of siding,  
you'll need help to choose the  
right one. Here's the inside  
scoop on the outsiders

By MARTIN ZIBAUER Photography LIAM MOGAN



in

In 2000, two psychologists conducted a field experiment in an upscale grocery store in Menlo Park, Cal. Over two Saturdays, they displayed Wilkin & Sons (Purveyors to Her Majesty the Queen) jams for shoppers to sample and buy. Every hour, the selection switched up from six jams to 24 jams and back again.

Think about that: 24 jars of jam, all different. If you timed your shopping right, you'd see so many more exotic fruit jams, more new flavour combinations, more jams that would make thoughtful thank-you gifts for your cat sitter. With so many choices, the ideal jam purchase would surely be on that table.

But, what the experiment showed is that you're actually less likely to buy when you have so many options, and you'll feel less satisfied with your shopping experience.

Choosing siding for your cottage, whether it's for a new building or to replace old siding, can be as overwhelming as buying jam in Menlo Park. There's more than a lot of choice, there's what psychologists call "overchoice." There are different materials—wood, vinyl, composites, and others—all formed and finished in different profiles, textures, and colours. Some seem to be one thing, but are in fact another: fibre-cement panels that look like cedar shakes, cedar shakes that install like tongue and groove, composites that look like stone.

Modern siding isn't intended to create a completely watertight, airtight skin around your building. Each overlapping piece of siding sheds water onto the piece below. But if a little moisture does get behind the siding—when the wind drives the rain sideways, for example—tiny gaps between pieces allow moisture to drain and evaporate. That's why it's

## KEEPING UP APPEARANCES

### CAULKING

Always use the specific type of caulking the manufacturer recommends, and buy the best—which is often the most expensive—says home inspector Marc Thibodeau. "Spending three times as much on caulking is better than caulking three times as often." Then follow the siding installation instructions, and add inspecting and recaulking your siding to your maintenance checklist.

### CLEANING

Thibodeau advises against using a pressure washer to clean your siding. There are so many gaps in any siding, you'll force water behind the surface. "All you need is a good brush and some mildewcide soap." If you work on a cool, overcast day you'll have time to hose everything off before the cleaning solution dries.

### REFINISHING

On south- and west-facing walls, where the UV is harshest and seasonal movement is greatest, you'll first see signs of aging in wood

siding's finish. Sand or scrape first to remove loose material, then clean the surface as above. Use a high-quality, fade-resistant finish; it will save you work in the long run. Before their backyard wedding in 2011, home inspector Tara Godwin and her fiancé restrained most of their wood siding, except for a couple of walls the guests wouldn't see. "It just wasn't a priority then," she says, laughing. "After we finally got around to it last year, you could not tell the difference between what we stained then and what we did eight years ago. There are some very good products now."

### TRIMMING

Even though people want a cottage to feel integrated in nature, says Godwin, "the best way to extend any siding's life is to keep vegetation away from it." Cutting back the forest, just a little, prevents damage from moving branches, helps damp areas dry out, and discourages pest infiltration. "And you'll have better fire resistance," she says.

Pricing listed is approximate and will vary with region, quantity, and retailer, and does not include accessories and installation.

# four more options

IF YOU'RE LOOKING FOR UNIQUE COTTAGE SIDING, TRY THESE MATERIALS

1

### POLYPROPYLENE CLADDING

A cousin of vinyl, using a different plastic and a different process (it's moulded, not extruded) for much crisper, deeper detailing. More impact-resistant and more expensive too. *Stacked Stone by Tando* (\$8.80–\$9.20 per sq. ft.)

2

### INSULATED VINYL

Stiff foam backing on vinyl siding adds rigidity and impact resistance, plus a modest insulation boost of R-2 to R-5. On its own, that's not enough to winterize a place. *Richmond Ultra by Kaycan* (\$4.30 per sq. ft.)

3

### SHOU SUGI BAN

Centuries ago, the Japanese began carefully charring the surface of wood to make it water-, insect-, and fire-resistant. Crafting the silky black surface takes great skill; don't let just any blowtorch-waving contractor near your cedar siding. *Kindl Cedar-Dark Char by South Parry Lumber* (\$17.50 per sq. ft.)

4

### METAL

Low-maintenance and DIY-friendly, aluminum siding is still around, though its tendency to dent and chalk has reduced its popularity. Steel siding—in panels similar to steel roofing or in shingle-like pieces—is very durable, but you'll probably need a pro to install it. Has Frank Gehry retired yet? *Seamless Steel by Ply Gem* (\$4.55–\$4.85 per sq. ft.)



# wood is a popular choice for DIYers

Modern by Maibec  
(wood, \$4.35–  
\$4.50 per sq. ft.)

Solid stains  
applied at the  
factory will often  
carry a warranty  
of 20 years

## DO-IT-YOURSELF DETAILS

Installing your own siding is no small job, but it is within reach of most DIYers. Start by watching installation tutorial videos on YouTube, suggests home inspector Marc Thibodeau. For more detailed instruction, download a few installation guides from manufacturer websites; the plot lines are boring, but they will help you assess if you have the skills, time, and energy for the task.

Wood is a popular siding for DIYers. It's familiar, and you probably have the cutting and fastening tools already. Factory-finished siding will save you time, and the back of each board will be well protected from moisture. Just remember to finish cut surfaces and to caulk gaps, as the manufacturer recommends. On any siding job, read the installation instructions carefully and follow them; if you wing it, you could end up with a leaky wall and a void warranty.

Vinyl siding can often be hung right overtop old wood siding (as long as there's no rot), so you can work on weekends without water damage during the week. There are some techniques DIYers can use (and contractors may be hesitant to spend time on) that can greatly improve the appearance of vinyl siding by disguising it. One hallmark of vinyl is J-channel, the narrow strips that wrap around many siding edges. In many spots (for example, at inside corners and around doors and windows), you can hide the J-channel with larger trim overtop.

Another visual trick takes some planning. With old-fashioned wood clapboard, skilled builders adjusted each board's overlap so horizontal edges lined up with door and window trim. You can't cheat the vinyl overlap—it's fixed—but you can lay out the job so the vinyl aligns with the trim wherever possible. Choosing siding that mimics narrow 3-inch clapboards helps; it has more horizontal lines, making it easier to align with existing openings.

important to follow the installation instructions when caulking: some gaps should not be caulked. Many siding types are also engineered to leave a small space for drainage and air circulation between the back of the siding and the housewrap.

To narrow down your siding options to the equivalent of the six-jam display, consider what matters to you. Saving money now, perhaps by installing your own siding, could be more important than avoiding maintenance later. Maybe environmental concerns top your list, and you want siding that will last longer than you will. Or, if your cottage is remote, the weight of the material could matter most.

### VINYL

Vinyl siding, one of the most popular exterior cladding types in North America, is budget friendly (going for as little as 90¢ per square foot) and low maintenance. It's lightweight and installs quickly, but it can be damaged by impact—branches, hockey pucks—especially when it's cold. Vinyl used to be prone to fading, but current formulations are more UV-resistant, allowing for deeper colours that stay true.

While all siding materials expand and contract as moisture levels or temperatures change, vinyl moves more than the rest. That's why vinyl needs to be hung on a wall, not nailed tight. The nailing strip, or hem, on vinyl siding has slots, not holes, and nail heads need to sit proud of the hem, usually by about  $\frac{1}{8}$ ". Then each piece can slide back and forth as the temperature changes. Nail it down tight, a common DIY mistake, and the siding will buckle in hot weather.

Thin vinyl can also sag in hot weather, so engineers often build in features to add rigidity. This premium-grade siding can cost about twice as much as standard grade but is beefier (at least 0.044") and has a folded-over, double-thickness hem. Deeper, more complex profiles (as when a single plank of vinyl lap siding zigzags in and

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## AN OUTSIDE JOB

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out to look like two narrow boards) also add backbone. As well, premium vinyl often has crisper details and a more convincing wood-grain finish.

Vinyl's low maintenance makes it a good option if you expect to sell the cottage at some point. "Buyers want the cottage to be a place of rest, not work," says Liz Hughes, a realtor in Ontario's Northumberland County. "From a resale perspective, the more you make your cottage maintenance free, the more value you add." Choose carefully, though; products at the very low end, she says, usually look low end. And, for resale value, pick siding in "colours that blend in with nature," says Hughes.

## WOOD

If you like jam made with authentic, traditional recipes—no artificial sweeteners or odd fruit combos, please—you'll understand the appeal of solid wood siding. As a traditional material in places where wood is abundant (e.g., Canada), to many of us, wood just looks right on a cottage. It comes in a wide range of profiles (verging on overchoice) and is easy to customize. A sustainable material, using a renewable resource, it can be safely disposed of at the end of its lifespan. Although wood siding that's finished, whether with stain, paint, or a clear product, needs more maintenance than any other common siding material, when it is maintained, it's long-lasting, durable, and impact resistant. Neglect the finish too long, and "the wood can start to crack and let water in behind," says David Ballentine, a cottage-focussed contractor in Parry Sound, Ont. The water can cause rot, attracting opportunistic insects and even woodpeckers.

A counterintuitive option is to leave wood siding, if it's a rot-resistant species, raw and unfinished. Raw cedar, for example, goes grey over time, like an old barn or a prairie fence. It does, however, weather to all 50 shades, so be prepared for uneven colour—especially near the eaves, shielded from sun and rain, and in damp spots that can turn black and are vulnerable to mould. "It's long-lasting and no maintenance," says Ballentine, "but you have to like the look."

The other extreme, maintenance-wise, is a clear-coat finish with UV protection to preserve the wood's freshly cut colour. Some clear finishes form a hard varnish-like film that protects against abrasion but must be lightly sanded and reapplied every three years or so. If you neglect it and the film begins to crack, it can peel off in sheets, adding hours of sanding to the refinishing process. Another type of clear finish, called a penetrating finish, doesn't form a film; it absorbs into the top layers of wood to protect it from rot, moisture, and UV damage. With many penetrating finishes, you'll need to reapply every four to six years, but prep is easy: just clean the wood first. Watch for signs of wear in the finish (likely on the walls facing south and west), indicating it's time for a maintenance coat.

There's a middle path between laissez-faire weathering and a constant battle against the elements: solid and semi-transparent stains that protect but don't need to be reapplied frequently. Like clear penetrating finishes, these popular stains soak into the wood, but include pigments and other ingredients that block UV damage more effectively, buying you extra time between reapplications.

As a home inspector near Peterborough, Ont., Marc Thibodeau regularly assesses cottage siding and finish durability. For wood, he likes products with a factory-applied solid stain. "I've installed quite a bit myself," he says. "It's very stable because the finish is baked on in the factory." The factory coats all six sides of every piece, including trim, so the siding is protected back and front. A factory finish will often carry a warranty of 20 years. If you're applying a finish yourself, coat all sides before you install. It's the next best thing to a factory finish; done well, you can expect to relax for eight to 10 years before it needs recoating.

## COMPOSITE

Wood-based composite, or engineered, sidings extend the factory-finish idea top to bottom through the siding—the siding itself is manufactured by fusing wood fibre with resins, to bind it, and wax, or other ingredients, to resist water damage. It's then factory finished for added protection. Mostly lightweight and easy to install, composites are very low maintenance and durable—some have a

25-year warranty on the finish and a 50-year warranty on the substrate. But there's a trade-off to the wood composites that are lightweight; many have a thin, low-relief profile, so they don't cast the deep shadow lines of solid wood siding (and some premium vinyl or fibre-cement products). In other words, their surfaces can look flat.

## FIBRE CEMENT

For Tara Godwin, a home inspector in Kelowna, B.C., there's another type of siding that has a clear advantage over wood or vinyl: fibre cement. It will not burn. "Fire fuel mitigation in this community is a passion project for me," she says, "so I tend to look for fire-resistant materials." Kelowna is no stranger to wildfires. Cottages, almost by definition, are in "interface areas, bordering on forested land," she says. "Fire is a concern."

A typical fibre-cement composite siding is a blend of Portland cement and fly ash or sand with cellulose fibres to add flexibility and resilience. It's essentially a type of concrete moulded into smooth boards, like a traditional dressed wood siding, or into a convincing imitation of a split cedar shake. It can even look like mortared stone.

Including installation, fibre cement costs about 40 per cent more than high-end vinyl. Most will need to be finished, either in the factory or on site. It absorbs moisture, expanding and contracting seasonally like wood, so you'll have to caulk it at seams and expansion gaps. It also weighs about five times the weight of vinyl and requires specialized tools and respirators to cut it safely, so may not be the best choice for drivers and cottagers with remote or water-access lots.

It's no big deal if you buy the wrong jar of jam; you can always forget it in a dark corner of the fridge. Siding matters. To find the balance of aesthetics, cost, and maintenance that works for you can take planning now, but the payoff is long term. How will you know you've made the right decision? Probably when you stop noticing the siding because it feels like it's always been there. Unlike jam, the right siding is the one you can forget. 🍓

*Martin Zibauer, who wrote about gravel road maintenance in the Summer '18 issue, loves him some ginger marmalade.*