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HOME CLINIC

HOME CLINIC; The Rot From Decaying Windowsills Can Spread to Framing and Walls

By John Warde
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WOOD windowsills can decay if they are not regularly maintained by painting or treating with waterproofing sealer, or if storm-window frames are so tightly sealed that they prevent sills from draining. Repairing decayed windowsills is important, because rot can spread to adjacent parts of the framing and cause moisture damage to walls.

The spread of minor or even moderate decay can be halted and the damaged areas restored by applying epoxy or acrylic wood filler. Two popular varieties found are Minwax High Performance Wood Filler, which should be used after applying Minwax High Performance Wood Hardener, and Mr. Mac's Wood Fix, which does not require hardener before application.

To use both kinds, first remove the decayed wood with a paint scraper or other tool. If applying hardener, just the crumbling wood has to be removed. Spongy areas can remain.

Apply the hardener, if it is suggested, by brushing it on and allowing it to penetrate or by drilling holes in the wood and pouring the hardener into them, following the manufacturer's instructions. Allow two to four hours for the hardener to cure.

Mix the filler, which hardens in moments, only when you are ready to apply it. Follow the package directions carefully. Some products have to be mixed precisely. Others have less stringent requirements and can be mixed to varying consistencies.

Spread the filler onto the damaged wood with a putty knife and shape the surface as well as you can before the filler hardens. Leave the surface slightly higher than the surrounding wood, to permit finishing. Then clean the knife with a solvent listed on the filler container.

After the hardening is complete, in about a half-hour, level and smooth the repair by sanding it with medium-grit sandpaper, followed by fine-grit sandpaper, if necessary.

Hardener and filler prevent rot from spreading. But to further protect the sill in case some areas were missed, saturate it by brushing on two coats of wood preservative after making repairs. If you intend to paint the sill, choose a preservative that accepts paint when dry. For sills to be left unpainted, use a waterproofing sealer that contains preservative like Thompson's Wood Protector.

To repair extensively rotted sills, some professionals saturate the wood with preservative and then sheathe them with aluminum flashing. Afterward caulking compound is applied around the edges and at the seams. That is a fairly easy task that can be done quickly and often is effective for years, provided that water does not enter beneath the sheathing. Naturally the wood of a sill has to be sound enough to hold the fasteners that attach the flashing.

But if for a person with moderate carpentry skills, a better solution is to replace a badly rotted sill with a new one. Begin by obtaining lumber that matches the existing sill, to perform the repair without interruption.

To measure the sill and eventually remove it, pry off the indoor trim, including the stool, or indoor sill. Work carefully, using a putty knife and flat prybar to avoid breaking trim pieces. Generally start at the top or sides of the window. The stool can seldom be removed until last. To prevent marring the finished molding surface, use pliers to pull any nails from it through the back.

Measure the width and thickness of the sill and its length outside the window. To remove the sill, saw through it in two places. Pry out the middle piece. Then wiggle the two side pieces to free them from the grooves or notches in the frame's sides, or

jambs. If nails remain in the jambs or outside trim, cut them off with a hacksaw.

Use the pieces of the old sill as a guide to mark the new lumber for sawing it to size. The new sill's ends, or horns, have to project beyond the trim around the outside of the window, and the sill's notched sides have to fit into the grooves of the jambs.

To determine the length of the sill's notches, measure the distance between the insides of the jambs, including the depths of both grooves. Then subtract that from the outside length of the sill. The difference equals the length of the notches. Divide the distance by 2 to calculate the length of each. The width of the notches should equal the width of the jambs.

After shaping the sill to fit, sand it and apply a preservative to all surfaces. Install the new sill from the outside by sliding it into the grooves in the jambs. Clean those out first, and use a mallet or a hammer struck against a block of scrap wood to tap the sill into place, if necessary. Be careful not to dislodge the window frame. If that occurs, it has to be shifted back and checked for vertical alignment with a level and for square, by measuring between its diagonal corners.

If there is a gap between the new sill and the subsill beneath it, slide thin wood shims, plywood or scrap shingles, beneath the sill to provide support. Then fill any gaps with fiberglass insulation to stop drafts.

Fasten the sill to the jambs with 8- or 10-penny finishing nails installed at an angle, so that they penetrate the jambs at the slots. Use a nail set to sink the heads of the nails below the surface.

Apply caulking compound to all exterior joints between the sill and the window frame, as well as where the horns of the sill touch the outside wall. Then reinstall the indoor window trim, beginning with the stool.

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