



New products help homeowners opt for easy maintenance

By DAVID BRADLEY

The Associated Press

Homeowners have earned a reprieve from the labor-intensive upkeep of fences, gutters, railings and decks.

Thanks to no — or low — maintenance polymer and composite materials, much of the sweat equity of frequent repairs — scraping-sanding-painting — is gone.

According to David Steed of Lowe's Home Improvement Warehouse, its easy to see why these sturdy materials made such a big splash at the biggest home-improvement showcase of them all: the just-concluded National Association of Home Builders convention in Las Vegas.

"These materials simply last longer and are nearly impervious to weather, sun, rot and insects," said Steed. "About all the homeowner needs to do is a little seasonal cleaning."

Tom Sawyer could only wish he knew of EverIron fencing. Borrowing glass-reinforced resin technology from the auto industry, this wrought-iron fence lookalike costs less than the real thing but the pre-finished, super stiff polymer panels have six times the impact-resistance of PVC plastic. With permanent color pigments, this faux-fencing will never need painting.

Also in the non-paint category is a composite railing that won't warp, rot, crack or split. The paint is contained in what paint techies call advanced PVC-capstock coating.

Marketed under the Severe Weather name, this mixture of recycled plastic and chips of real wood retains the look and feel of natural wood but shares the low-maintenance characteristics of composite materials. Different balusters, spindles and panels are available in a range of colors.

Plastic-wood composites, aka ChoiceDek by Weyerhaeuser, have elbowed aside wood as the material of choice for deck planks and posts. While the cost is marginally higher than wood, homeowners can forget about splinters, loose boards and screws that pop up through the surface.

Leak-prone gutters and downspouts are on the receiving end of an infusion of nonmetal improvements aimed at foiling water and accumulated debris. New generation vinyl sections are joined by leak-proof vinyl adhesive, and a network of ridges on the bottom of the gutters elevates leaves to be washed away. And there's good news for heavy rainfall areas: the gutters are rated to handle up to 6 inches of rain per hour. The toughened vinyl won't show dents and resists damage from

falling limbs and ice dams.

A good cleaning might be the extent of annual maintenance duties for any of these outdoor

materials.

"If you ask homeowners to name the home-maintenance chores they dread most, they

often single out fences and decks and gutters," said Steed. "These chores just got a whole lot easier, and there's no doubt

these materials signal that non-wood and metal products have arrived on the exterior materials scene."

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