

# Window Wisdom

BY ELIZABETH LUNDAY

One thing I envy about owners of new houses is their freedom to open windows whenever they want, willy-nilly, on a whim, without the aid of a screwdriver, putty knife, or rubber mallet. The windows on my 1920s bungalow are beautiful, multi-paned Prairie-style works of art, but when it comes to opening them, they are ugly. Besides being glued shut with paint, my windows are peeling, cracking, and generally a mess.

I put off the task of restoring my double-hung windows for the first two years that we owned our house until I woke up one Saturday morning with a sudden zest for the job. I envisioned pulling into the driveway and being greeted by smooth, freshly painted window frames. I fantasized about opening windows with ease. I decided to start with the most prominent set of windows in the house, the ones right in the middle of the front porch. My husband, the family carpenter, was out of town, but that didn't stop me from diving right in. How hard could it be?

After a quick run to the hardware store to buy a wire brush and a putty knife, I eagerly applied myself to the umpteen layers of paint weathered like snakeskin across the frame. An hour later, I had banged my thumb raw and scraped a scant 2" square bare. Four hours later, I was covered in dust and had inhaled a lifetime's worth of lead-based paint. My enthusiasm was gone, and my arms, hands, and back ached.

Applying a fresh bandage to my thumb, I noticed my neighbor Murray knee-deep in another renovation project in his driveway. To date Murray has finished his attic, rebricked the fireplace, and added a bathroom to his house.

"Murray," I called, "This is harder than I thought."

"That's because you don't have the right tool," he replied.

I started to ask him what I needed, but Murray was already gone. He reappeared



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minutes later brandishing a heat gun. When he switched it on, I watched transfixed as the paint bubbled and blistered. With a putty knife, Murray scraped off the blistered paint, and it slid away like butter. So began my apprenticeship.

I soon found that using a heat gun was not as easy as it looked. I could only remove small patches of paint until Murray demonstrated how to melt an entire swath and scrape it away with one movement. After cautioning me not to set the house on fire, Murray left me to my own devices, but he returned later to check on my progress and deliver a manly carbide-tipped paint scraper to replace my wimpy putty knife.

The following weekend, after I had removed old caulk and discovered a 3'-long, 1"-wide gap between my window frame and the brick, it was Murray's house I escaped to in a state of panic. His calmness reassured me. "We'll just take a look at that," he said, heading straight for my porch.

After examining the gap, Murray explained that I just needed some moulding. "I've got cove moulding in the back I'm not using," he said. Murray retrieved the moulding, cut it to size, and then used his nail gun to secure it in place.

Whenever I would thank him, Murray would just reply, "Oh, we've done so much to our house over the years. You just keep at it and eventually you learn something."

Murray continued to educate me. When I was ready to glaze the windows, he looked at my tub of compound, shook his head, and sent me back to the store for glazing in a tube before showing me how to apply it properly.

A month after I started, I was applying the last coat of paint to my windows. Their broken, divided top lights had been replaced, and the cracks sealed with caulk. Best of all, they opened effortlessly. I hollered for Murray, who was hunched over sawhorses in his driveway.


"What do you think?" I asked, beaming, as he walked up my porch steps.

"Real good," he replied.

As I basked in the glow of my mentor's approval, he added, "Now that you know what to do, the rest of the windows will go quicker."

I wondered if he could sense my spirit oozing through the floor as he headed back to his project. Before he was out of sight, I began circling my house, tallying windows. By the time I was done, I was staggering: There were 30 windows to go. Heaving the heat gun, I gripped my carbide-tipped scraper and turned to face the next cracked and peeling frame. You keep at it, and eventually you learn something. 🐿

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