By Wyatt Myers

Tips for Fixing Up an Old Log Cabin

Renovating an old log cabin may sound like a charming project, but the job can be more challenging than most people realize. Here's what you need to know before you start.

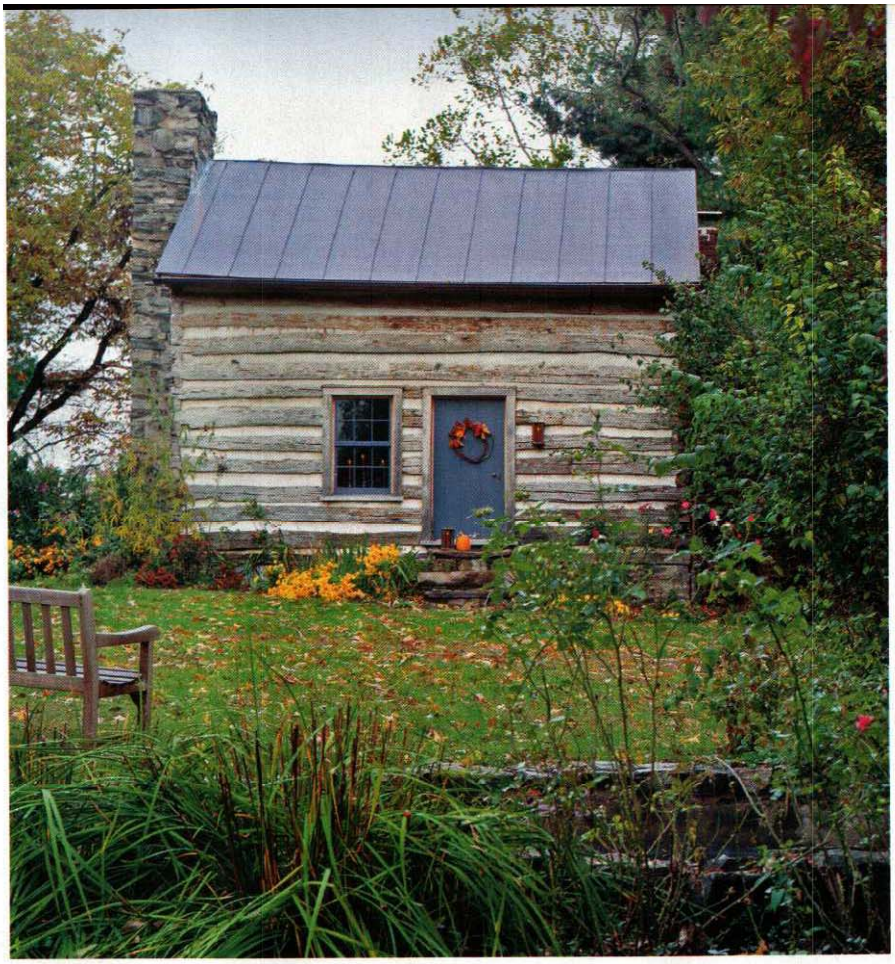
A big consideration when thinking about renovating is the condition of the logs. For deeply weathered logs, you'll probably need to blast them to remove the existing finish.

Cindy Thiede photos

Finding a charming old log cabin can be like stumbling upon hidden treasure. Sure, it may have a bit of wear and tear on the beat up, weathered logs, but the beauty is still there. For many, the old home lures them into thoughts of fixing up the place – a fun project to tackle over long weekends, right?

But while the thought of renovating an old home sounds exciting on the surface, the reality is usually more challenging. Depending on the age or extent of damage, it may take quite a bit of work — and money — to bring it back to a livable condition. "Unless you are getting a tremendous deal or have deep pockets, I would suggest avoiding a home that has not been maintained over the years," says Mark Elliott, the vice president of Coventry Log Homes in Woodsville, New Hampshire.

If you still have your eye on an older log home, here's what to keep in mind.



Step #1: Look at the Big Picture

No matter how charming an old home may seem, problems such as sagging or shifting foundations, inadequate septic systems or damaged roofs can render a renovation project very difficult or expensive. So it's best to take a closer look at these components of the home before you buy. "If you can bring in a building professional to look with you, that's ideal," says Allen Halcomb, president of MossCreek in Knoxville, Tennessee. "Otherwise, it can be like reading an X-ray without training."

Step #2: Take a Closer Look at the Logs

Another important consideration, of course, is the condition of the logs. If they

THE FUTURE OF BLASTING

Until recently, the preferred method of blasting wood logs was cob-blasting. This involves using ground corn cobs sprayed at high pressure to clean old logs.

But Beth Borrego, vice president of See Dirt Run!, a wood restoration and preservation company in Germantown, Maryland, says that cob blasting is gradually being surpassed by crushed-glass blasting. "Crushed glass is an up-and-coming blasting method and much preferred over cob-blasting," she says.

According to Borrego, blasting with crushed glass has several advantages. For one, it doesn't rot or decay like ground corn cobs sometimes can. It also doesn't change the Ph balance of the soil around the home. But perhaps most important, blasting with crushed glass is actually more effective and less expensive than using ground cobs.

A growing number of wood cleaning and restoration companies are using crushed glass, so be sure to ask your local expert about this blasting medium if you are considering blasting for your log home project.

are fairly new, you might be able to get by with chemically stripping and power-washing them before applying a new finish, says Beth Borrego, vice president of See Dirt Run!, a wood restoration and preservation company in Germantown, Maryland.

For deeply weathered logs, however, you will likely need to blast the logs. This entails shooting a "blasting medium," such as ground corn cobs or crushed glass, at the home at high pressure to remove the existing finish.

Blasting is effective, but it can also be dangerous and potentially damage the home if not done properly. That's why it's best to leave blasting to a qualified professional. For a closer look at the pros and cons of common blasting techniques, see the "The Future of Blasting" sidebar at left.

Step #3: Check for Cracks

Also keep an eye out for cracks and checks in the logs. These are by no means a deal-breaker, as cracks and checks in old logs are fairly typical, but Borrego says it's important to determine the types of checks you're dealing with.

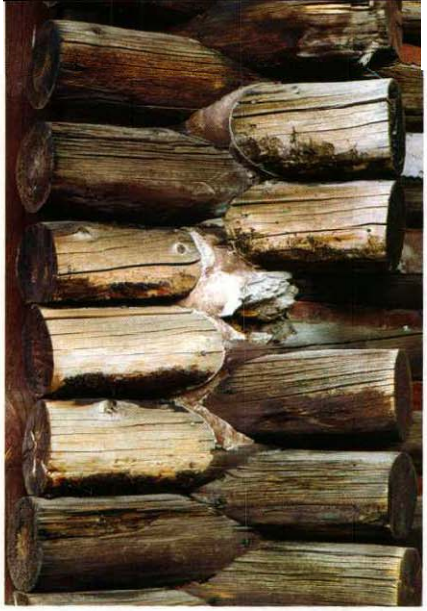
"You'll want to see if the checks face upward or downward," she says. "Water can get into upward-facing checks, and the logs may be rotting from the inside out."

Cracks and checks can usually be repaired, but here again, it's important to make sure it's done properly. "You can't just use a caulking from the home center, as it's not made to flex the way logs do," says Borrego. "You need to clean the crack properly, use the appropriate backer rod, and then fill it with a check sealer that's made specifically for logs."

Step #4: Spot the Rot

Another big issue with wood is rot. And how much rot you find will determine the extent of work that is needed to repair the log walls. Borrego suggests starting in the areas that commonly rot, such as under windows, on log ends, where water runs off the roof, or around air conditioning units and power meters. "One of the simplest methods is to thump the house," she says. "If you hear a solid sound, that's good. If you hear a hollow sound like a melon, there is probably rot present."

If you find a small amount of rot, the typical procedure for dealing with it includes removing the rot, cleaning the wood, applying a fungicide like borate, adding hardener and epoxy to the area, and then putting a log face over the damaged portion of the log.



When thinking about renovating, look at the condition of the logs. For weathered logs, you'll probably need to blast them to remove the existing finish.

If the rot is more extensive, you may need to replace logs. This is where the cost and difficulty can get pretty extensive. "You'll want to get an assessment and estimate from a professional for this," says Borrego.

Step #5: Weed out Warp

In an older log home, it's not uncommon to see bowed or warped logs. "Wood does not warp or twist until it gets down to about 17-percent moisture content," says John Ricketson, project manager for Hearthstone in Macon, Georgia. "About 99 percent of log homes are built from green wood, and clients don't see the twisting for several years after construction."

Except for extreme instances, it usually doesn't take much to deal with warping. "In small instances, the cure is worse than the disease," says Ricketson. "Make sure the warping or twisting does not cause a structural problem, and use the right maintenance materials to keep the twisting from allowing water to enter." COZY