

POWER WASHER'S  
GUIDEBOOK

# CLEANING CEDAR HOMES

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**E**ditor's Note: This chapter is new to the revision of the 2002 *Power Washer's Guidebook*.

### Geographical Considerations

Cedar homes are found in many regions of the United States. Any suburban area that has decks is likely to have cedar houses. Given the correct weather conditions to perform the work, the job of cleaning and sealing a cedar home can be very rewarding. The service season is the same as it is for decks.

### Typical Job

[Notes: This type of job should be done only by a contractor who possesses a thorough understanding of wood care, including several years of experience and a specific knowledge of cedar. Removal of lead paint, which is found on many older homes (especially those built prior to 1976), is not addressed here except to remind (1) to test for lead as required by the prevailing legal entity and (2) to never attempt to remove lead-based paint without first becoming certified by the proper authorities.]

The job begins with a site visit to look over the home and determine what needs to be done. As with decks, there are unique conditions that contractors should evaluate and then factor into their bid and the way they would approach the project. Assess the basics: Condition of the wood—is it bare and ultraviolet (UV) damaged or does it have a coating installed? (If there is a coating—which kind and how easily can it be removed? Can the coating be maintained?) Terrain—is it level or sloped and do trees and shrubs impede access? How many ladder changes will be required?

Next, with the basics in mind, consider the following: Roof—what is its composition? (Is there cedar above the roof line? Will you be able to install fall arrest gear or will it be necessary to rent a lift?) Condition of the home—are there







pre-existing conditions, such as peeling trim paint or rotting wood? (How will they be handled—by your team or by using painting and carpentry subcontractors?)

Finally, clean a test spot. Select a spot in the most challenging and inconspicuous area so that you can see what you are really up against.

Techniques That Work Best

If the existing finish is in good condition and can be maintained, a maintenance wash alone would be appropriate. The correct method is dictated by the instructions in the manufacturer’s Technical Data Sheet for the product that is installed on the home.

Not all manufacturers recommend the same maintenance cleaning methods for their products since many chemicals are harmful to coatings. Some products, for example, might require using a mixture of bleach and tri-sodium phosphate (TSP); others require an acid-based cleaner.

Never use just high pressure and never use just hot water and high pressure to clean. Warm water increases a cleaner’s solubility and effectiveness. Eighty degrees Fahrenheit should be the maximum temperature for water. The only nozzle (aka, tip) used should be a green (25-degree) or white (40-degree) one.

Let the cleaners, brushes, dwell time, and agitation do the work. The pressure washer is the rinsing tool. You should not be using pressure to clean. A nozzle that produces 1500 psi or lower is suggested for best results. (Spray nozzles with larger orifices reduce the psi; use a nozzle conversion chart to select a nozzle that gives an optimal match.)

Apply the cleaners by injection or sprayer onto the side of the home and allow sufficient dwell time, keeping the surface wet with additional cleaner. It’s important to remember that if the cleaners dry, they are no longer active. To reactivate them, simply apply more of the cleaner.

Agitate tough areas with a soft brush, not with your wand and pressure.

The final step is rinsing using a soap nozzle. If needed, re-apply to areas requiring additional cleaning and repeat the process.

Exceptions

Soffit vents and gable vents present potential points of water intrusion into the attic, which can lead to mold or rot damage later on. Use

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a brush to address these areas and a soft rinse to minimize the chance of water entry.

Stripping—There are a variety of chemicals suited to stripping failing finishes from wood. Removal method depends on type of finish.

Cedar is a very soft wood, which make it more susceptible to damage than many other wood species. (All species of cedar are categorized as soft on the Janka hardness scale at 12 percent wood moisture content, or WMC.)

Note, too, that cedar siding presents a vertical finish, which lasts longer but is more difficult to remove than a horizontal finish on a deck. Chemicals tend to run off the vertical surface. If the finish is relatively intact, the runoff presents issues with the ability of chemicals to be able to work properly in a shorter period of time. Temperatures and wind conditions may necessitate frequent re-application to keep the product active until it has sufficiently softened the coating.

When stripping a cedar-sided home, you will be using the pressure washer. Remember that 1500 psi or less is sufficient to aid in the removal of the softened coating.



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During the washing, six inches is the closest distance the nozzle should get to the wood to minimize furring or splintering. Keep the wand moving and don't make sudden back and forth passes, since this causes 'stop and start' marks that will scar the wood and have to be repaired by sanding. Due to an uneven application or overlapping coats of the finish, reapplying the stripper and allowing additional dwell time may be necessary. Agitating the remaining coating with a brush can be helpful before washing again and can aid in breaking through multiple coats of finish.

A variety of tools are needed to effectively perform this level of project. As an important note, a hot water pressure washer is preferable to a cold water unit—not because you will be washing with hot water, but because warm water is preferable for properly mixing chemicals. If your only pressure washer is a cold unit and you have to strip a finish from a house, the work will be more difficult and will take longer because warm water is unavailable to you. Remember, chemicals dissolve and go into solution better in warm water than they do in cold. Use the warmer outdoor temperatures to your advantage.

#### Equipment and Supplies

Basic equipment requirements are: pressure washer; extension lances and proper tips; X-jet or M-5 jet downstream injector; ladders and stand-offs; fall arrest harness and anchor system; chemical sprayer, buckets, stir sticks, pump-up sprayers; soft bristled truck washing brushes and telescopic poles; tarps, plastic, clamps, blue tape; lift rental (for certain houses); personal protective equipment (PPE), such as chemical respirators, waterproof (PVC) jackets and pants, safety goggles, and protective footwear.

Some of the commonly used chemicals for removing finishes are sodium hydroxide based. (They are used with success on certain oil-based products.) Products with an ethylene glycol formulation help with acrylic-based coatings. Some are available as an

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additive to boost other formulations. (Check with the manufacturer before combining any chemicals that are not specifically labeled for mixing.)

Caustics should always be neutralized with an acid such as oxalic or citric or a blend thereof. There are many alcohol-based and non-caustic gel-based products designed to remove acrylic coatings and paints. The latter are not inexpensive, but they are very effective and environmentally-friendly options.

It is always better to buy a product already formulated to do the job. Mixing chemicals is not suggested and may create an unintended liability. For instance, with mixed chemicals, you will not have a specific material safety data sheet (MSDS) available if needed.

**How to Bill**

Pricing varies too much by area for a specific treatment here. The profile developed when assessing the project (see Typical Job, above) should be considered when developing a price that adheres to a company’s balance sheet. Costs such as materials, labor, various insurances, rental equipment, fuels, and other expenses should be weighed and a profit added when pricing any job. (The price you charge to do a deck would be too low to charge for a cedar home.)

**Ancillaries**

Trim painting is a natural add-on when working on the siding, especially if the paint is in poor condition. Decks and screened in porches are often good add-ons when working on a cedar house, simply because they are attached to the dwelling. Wood deck furniture is another easy ancillary project that can be done when the house is being done and easily cleaned and sealed for a renewed appearance.

**Problems to Avoid**

The cleaners or strippers used when working on the siding may impact the deck or porch, so it is important to let the owner know this ahead of time if the deck and porch are not part of the project.

Cedar siding should never be blasted using a dry media method



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because it is a milled section of lumber with both early-growth wood and late-growth wood exposed. Blasting with dry media yields an undesirable result similar to that of washing cedar with high pressure; it creates an uneven grain.

### How to Fix Mistakes

Not mistakes, per se, but a consequence of the chemical process of stripping are the rough-looking patches where the adhesive bond between the finish and the wood have been broken. (At a wood certification class many years ago, the term 'fuzzies' was introduced for such patches; and the term has been adopted by contractors.)

The patches appear as a short hair-like substance that is attached to the siding and does not rinse away. (There is a similar result obtained with deck stripping.) A patch has the look of peach skin or crushed velvet, including short and long strands.

The strands (fuzzies) are easily removed with 3M pads or Osborn brushes attached to a variable speed buffing tool, such as those made by DeWalt or Makita. Although it is possible to seal directly over the strands, it is not recommended as it will yield a less-than professional result.

Beth Borrego, Vice President of See Dirt Run!, Inc., has been a contributing freelance author for several publications, including *Cleaner Times*. She is active in PWNA, having served for two years on its board and conducted seminars at conventions. Borrego has also spoken at several round table events. Realizing her vision for education in our industry, she launched *The Grime Scene*, an online BBS Forum for cleaning contractors.

Rod Rodriguez is President of See Dirt Run!, Inc. He started the company in 1999, combining a desire to own a business with the entry into an industry that would enable him to express his meticulous nature. Rodriguez has established high standards of excellence for his company. He personally trains all employees and manages all large projects. A skilled carpenter, Rodriguez makes beautiful custom cabinetry. He enjoys playing the electric guitar in his spare time. **CT**