COOPERATIVE EXTENSION SERVICE
UNIVERSITY OF KENTUCKY • COLLEGE OF AGRICULTURE

Selecting Wall Coverings

Today the term wall covering, not wallpaper, more accurately describes the variety of papers, vinyls, and laminates available to decorate the walls of your home. With the myriad of colors, textures, patterns, and price ranges available, there is something to suit everyone's taste.

Technology has provided many new easy-care, aesthetically appealing products that are easy to apply and remove. A joke from the Depression days of the 1930's—"Take down the wallpaper, we're moving"—has become a reality. You can now buy wall coverings that can be taken down from one wall and reapplied to another surface.

Many of today's wall coverings are designed for easy application by the do-it-yourselfer. You may want to hire a professional paperhanger, however, if you select materials that require special skills, such as real grasscloth, silk, natural cork, foils and mylars, or hand-printed papers. If you hire a professional you can expect to spend 40 percent of the total cost on materials and 60 percent on labor, profit, and overhead. For example, if materials cost $250, you would pay about $375 to have the work done, for a total cost of $625.

Types of Wall Coverings

Wallpaper
Wallpaper is the oldest and most familiar wall covering. It is made of paper with printed or embossed designs and comes in an almost limitless variety of colors and patterns. Many wallpapers are prepasted for easy installation.

The durability of wallpaper varies with its weight and quality. High-grade papers are firm, easy to handle when wet, and do not tear or wrinkle readily.

Plastic-coated papers wear better than uncoated papers; however, they are not recommended for use in heavy-traffic areas or where severe soiling conditions exist. They can be washed with soap and water, but cannot be scrubbed or cleaned with bleach or abrasive cleaners.

Vinyl
Vinyl wall coverings are synthetic films made of polyvinyl chloride. Most are laminated to a fabric or paper backing. Many are strippable; that is, they can be easily removed from walls without steam or water. Nonstrippable types may need to be steamed off.

Vinyl wall coverings have good soil, stain, and scuff resistance and are mildew and moisture proof. All are washable with warm, soapy water. Many can be scrubbed with a soft-textured brush and therefore are recommended for bathrooms, kitchens, children's rooms, or other areas which require frequent cleaning. They are available in a variety of colors, patterns, and textures. Vinyls can hide wall imperfections and give some support to walls with cracked and peeling plaster.

Some vinyls have a glossy, "wet look" surface. These usually require special wall preparations, as any defect on the wall is highlighted by the "wet look."

Foil and Mylar
Foil wall coverings are made of thin, flexible sheets of aluminum or simulated metal and laminated to a paper or fabric backing. Some are coated with mylar to give a highly reflective mirror finish.

Foils and mylars require extra care when hanging; any scratches, creases, or folds spoil their appearance. They also require a perfect surface. Many manufacturers recommend that they be used with a lining paper. The lining minimizes the possibility of mildew formation, improves adhesion, and allows foils and mylars to be used over problem walls. Unlike other coverings, foils neither contract nor expand upon drying, so air bubbles must be removed immediately. Because foils conduct electricity, care must be taken to avoid touching switches, wires, etc. when applying them.

Flocks
Flocks have raised fibers, usually of nylon, applied in a design to simulate the look of velvet. They require careful handling during application and care. Some may be washed with a soft sponge and sudsy water.

Grasscloth and Cork
Grasscloth and cork offer textural interest to walls. They are relatively expensive and require special application techniques. Lining paper is usually recommended.

Textile Fabrics and Burlap
Fabric wall coverings have increased in popularity during recent years. They have been used for centuries for warmth and elegance. Fabrics provide a depth of texture and richness no other wall covering can provide. The best wall covering fabrics are medium weight and closely woven, such as sailcloth, burlap, ticking, and chintz. Sheets may also be used. Some fabrics designed specifically as wall coverings have a paper backing for easy application. Those without a backing must be preshrunk.

Lightweight fabrics may be shirred onto rods; other methods of attachment include starch, staples, nylon hook and loop tape, and wallpaper paste. Paste gives the most professional look and is the most permanent but does require special care. It is almost impossible to obtain perfect design matches with fabric.

Murals and Borders
Murals, available in hand-screened, machine-printed, or lithographed pictorial designs, come in precut panel strips. A common mistake with murals is to hang the scene too high. The scene should "float" onto the furniture. If the scene does not cover the entire wall, background panels can be used to fill out the area on either side. Murals, available in a

wide range of prices, are printed on a variety of wall covering materials. Because the installation methods vary, they should be hung professionally.

Borders are used to complement wall coverings or as a contrast to painted walls. They may be hung along the ceiling or at chair-rail height for added interest.

Decorating Hints

Because walls occupy the largest area in a room, your selection of color, texture, and pattern in wall coverings will have a major effect on the mood and appearance of your room.

Color Tips
- Warm colors (reds, oranges, and yellows) give a feeling of warmth to a room. They have a stimulating effect and make a room seem smaller than it really is.
- Cool colors (blues, greens, and lavenders) appear to move away from you and can make a small room seem larger. Cool colors are restful and good to use on walls that get a great deal of sunlight.
- Dark colors enclose space, making a room appear smaller.
- Light colors and white expand space; thus a room appears larger.
- The impressions given by warm and cool colors can be used to overcome the cramped appearance of a long, narrow room. Applying a warm or dark covering on the long walls and a light or cool covering on the short walls tends to square up such a room.
- Related colors and patterns in adjoining rooms enhance a feeling of space and continuity.
- Colors with contrasting intensities, such as light with dark, work together more successfully than hues of identical intensity.
- Neutrals (white, gray, black, brown, and beige) provide excellent backgrounds for strong colors and patterns on other furnishings.
- Colors appear darker and brighter on walls than elsewhere because the vertical position provides a ready-made surface for light rays to bounce off, thus intensifying them.

Design Tips
- Small, delicate patterns may seem lost in large rooms.
- Wall hangings, such as pictures and textiles, show up to greater advantage on plain walls.
- Extremely high ceilings can be made to appear lower by stopping the wall covering a foot or so below the ceiling and treating the rest of the wall the same as the ceiling. A horizontal stripe pattern can give the same effect. A dark color on the ceiling with lighter walls will also lower a ceiling.
- Strong vertical stripes in darker shades than the ceiling color can make walls appear higher.
- Quiet designs and colors are usually recommended for rooms intended for sleeping, resting, reading, and conversation.
- For active rooms, such as the den or family room, bold, vivid designs and colors may be used.
- Because the hallway and dining room are not occupied for long periods of time, they may have more outstanding patterns and colors.

- Kitchen walls should be cheerful and restful.
- Spotty, scattered patterns and realistic designs that copy nature in every detail may quickly become boring. Conventionalized or stylized designs are generally more satisfactory over a long period of time.
- Patterns can be used to establish moods in a room. For example, damasks and brocades are elegant; fine stripes are formal, while bright, detailed patterns are considered informal.
- A room crowded with furniture will appear more cluttered with patterned walls.
- Large designs usually make a room appear smaller.
- Small designs usually make a room seem larger.
- Wall coverings with definite plaids or stripes will accentuate walls that are not perfectly straight with floors and ceilings.
- Light-colored ceilings reflect more light than dark-colored ones.
- A glossy surface covering will produce more glare than a matte surface covering.
- Painting woodwork the same color as the background or the predominant color in the wall covering helps tie the woodwork and walls together, making a unified background for the room furnishings.
- A wall covering may provide the source of a color scheme for a room, or it can be used to tie together all the colors used in a room.
- A wall covering with large patterns is difficult to hang and match in a room broken up by a number of doorways, windows, alcoves, etc. It also gives the room a disjointed appearance; a smaller pattern is a better choice.
- For special impact, try a wall covering on only one wall or just above chair-rail molding.
- Use leftover wall coverings for one-of-a-kind objects–desk accessories, drawer liners, covering for a trash can, etc.

Estimating Wall Covering Needs

Wall coverings are available in widths ranging from 20½ inches to 28 inches wide, with each roll containing 36 square feet. To allow for pattern matching and trimming, you should count on covering only about 30 square feet per roll. Prices are given for a single roll, but rolls are sold most frequently in double and sometimes in triple rolls.

To estimate the amount of paper you need, measure the height and width of the wall space to be covered. Multiply these two figures to get the number of square feet of wall area. For example:

You are planning to cover the walls of a room that is 10 by 12 feet wide and 8 feet high.

10 + 10 + 12 + 12 = 44 feet (distance around the room).
44 x 8 = 352 square feet of wall area.

Now measure the square footage of windows, openings for bookshelves, etc. Subtract this figure from the total wall area, and you'll have the amount of wall area to be covered. For example:

1 door: 7 feet by 4 feet = 28 square feet.
2 windows: 5 feet by 3 feet = 30 square feet.

Total door and window space = 58 square feet. Subtract this from total wall area.

352 - 58 = 294 square feet of wall space to be covered.

Divide 294 by 30 square feet per roll of wall covering to find the number of single rolls needed for the project.

294 ÷ 30 = 9.8 single rolls (round off to 10).

Since most manufacturers produce wall coverings in double rolls, you should order 5 double rolls.

For coverings with large pattern repeats, there may be less waste per roll if individual strips are cut from two rolls and alternated. For example, strip number 1 is cut from roll number 1, strip number 2 from roll number 2, strip number 3 from roll number 1, strip number 4 from roll number 2 and so on. If the repeat happens to fall right, you may have no waste, or at most a few inches. This is a trick used by professionals and one worth knowing.

With textured or plain wall coverings, where there is no repeat, you will be able to use most of the extra 6 square feet per roll. Since wall coverings are made in batches, it's a good idea to play it safe and buy an extra roll or two. Otherwise, if you run short, you may not be able to get an exact color match. Most dealers will take back uncut rolls. Also, the unused covering material may come in handy someday to repair a tear or blemish.

Applying Wall Coverings

Wall coverings come in unpasted, prepasted, and self-adhesive forms. The type of wall covering you choose depends on personal preference and the availability of forms in a particular wall covering. Paste or other adhesives must be applied to every strip of the unpasted variety as it is hung on the wall. Some coverings, such as foils and mylars, give best results if paste is also applied to the wall.

Adhesive products for wall coverings come in a variety of forms: powder, liquid, premixed, and vinyl. The type used is determined by the kind of covering. For example, paper-backed vinyl coverings can be hung with a premixed paste, while a powdered wheat paste is used with grasscloth and cork coverings. Nonstaining adhesives are preferable for fabrics and burlaps.

A prepasted wall covering has been fully pasted at the factory. Water is all that is needed to apply it. Prepasted coverings help make hanging coverings an easy do-it-yourself project.

Self-adhesives are hung after peeling off a paper backing. This type of covering is more difficult to apply since it is more likely to stretch out of shape.
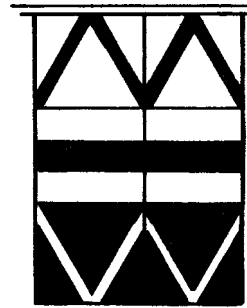
Today's coverings are usually precision trimmed with no selvages or edges to remove. Some hand-screened prints, however, may require trimming before they can be hung on the wall.

Check with the dealer or manufacturer on the type of preparations and products to use with the covering you have in mind. Most wall coverings come with information on preparing wall surfaces, measuring and cutting the covering, and applying it to the wall. In addition, the dealers usually have booklets which contain step-by-step instructions for hanging wall coverings. The booklets also include recommendations for pasting, cutting, and hanging wall coverings, as well as working aro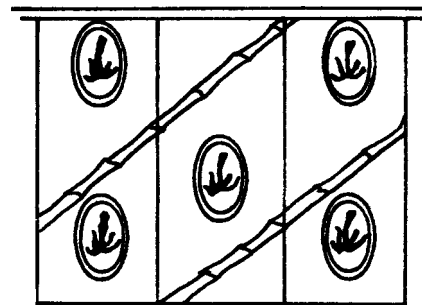und corners, windows, switch plates, and other difficult areas. Many wall covering dealers also offer free instructional clinics for the do-it-yourselfer.

Pattern Matching

Before cutting patterned wall coverings, you will want to check the type of pattern match. In a straight-across match, the point of match goes directly across the strips. Every strip is the same at the ceiling line, and flowers or plaids continue in successive strips to form an overall design.
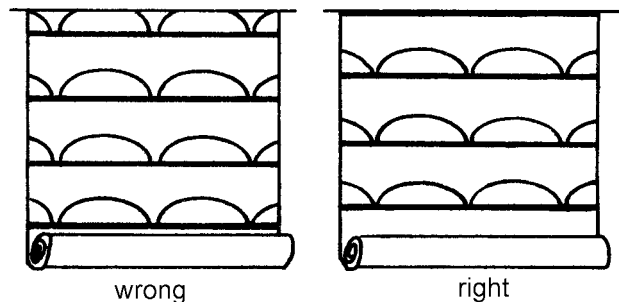

In a drop match design, the design runs diagonally across the wall. The design is staggered, so only every other strip is identical at the ceiling line.

Plain or random-match wallcoverings do not present a matching problem, but most manufacturers usually suggest that strips be reversed as the covering is hung. When this type of wall covering is printed, the coloring may be heavier at one edge than the other. By reversing each strip, dark edges will butt to dark edges and light to light, minimizing any color shading.

You will also want to start the first strip so the pattern design is pleasing at the ceiling line. Do not split an object at the ceiling line.

wrong   right

Care

Today's wall coverings are easy to care for and will stay fresh looking and attractive for years with a little attention.

In general, wall coverings should be dusted periodically with a clean, dry mop, a soft cloth wrapped over a broom, or a vacuum cleaner brush. Day-to-day dirt, dust buildup, or dirty finger marks can be removed from washable coverings with lukewarm water and mild soap.

When there is extra-heavy dirt buildup, it is advisable to start at the bottom and use a sponge to wash up a foot or two in long, sweeping strokes. Rinse with clear water and wipe clean with a rag or terry-cloth towel. Continue up to the ceiling. This procedure avoids the problem of water running down a dirty surface and causing streaks that might be difficult to remove. Drip marks will not show on the cleaned wet area if wiped off immediately. For stubborn stains, wash once, let dry, and wash again. Abrasives should not be used on any type of wall covering.

The best way to clean nonwashable wall coverings, particularly flocks or those made of fabric or grasscloth, is to use the soft-brush attachment of a vacuum cleaner from time to time to remove dust and surface dirt.

If walls are properly prepared according to the recommendations for each type of wall covering, wall coverings should give excellent wear over the years. However, sometimes even those wall coverings that are well hung can come loose, particularly in a bathroom where steam is a factor. This is easy to remedy. All you need to do is to pull the piece away from the wall far enough to be able to get a thin coat of white household glue underneath. Press down firmly for a minute or two, then wipe off excess glue with a damp sponge. If for any reason it is necessary to patch a wall covering, the best method is to tear off a piece of matching pattern from the leftover scraps (it is always advisable to keep some handy for this type of emergency) and fit it over the damaged area. The reason for tearing a piece, as opposed to cutting it, is that a feather-edge will blend into the background much better than a straight-cut edge.

Wall Coverings

	Qualities	Recommended Use	Recommended Adhesive	Care
Wallpapers: Untreated	Stains easily from moisture. Non-strippable— steam off.	Light-use areas— bedrooms.	Wheat paste—some are prepasted.	Vacuum or wipe with dry cloth—do not wash.
Plastic coated	Nonstrippable—steam off.	Light- to medium-use areas.	Wheat paste—some are prepasted.	Washable.
Vinyls Solid Vinyls	Durable—strippable.	Moderate- to heavy-use areas.	Vinyl adhesive (powder, liquid, or premixed)—some are prepasted, some are self- adhesive.	Washable.
Paper backed	Durable—most are strippable.	Moderate- to heavy-use areas.	Vinyl (powder, liquid, or premixed)—some are prepasted.	Washable.
Fabric backed	Most durable—waterproof —strippable.	Heavy-use areas— kitchens, bathrooms.	Vinyl (powder, liquid, or premixed)—some are prepasted.	Scrubbable.
Foil	Fabric- or paper-backed styles. Requires special handling (conducts electricity). Tears easily.	With perfect walls or over lining paper.	Premixed vinyl adhesive. Apply adhesive to wall.	Washable.
Flocks	Fabric- or paper-backed styles. Durability varies. Requires care in hanging.	Formal areas.	Apply adhesive to wall.	Most are washable. Avoid over-brushing during application.
Fabric	Preshrink if no backing. Lining papers recommended for some fabrics. May be difficult for a do-it-yourselfer. Acoustical qualities.	Light- to-moderate use areas.	Nonstaining paste, staples, shirr on rods, starch (more temporary method). Apply adhesive to wall.	Vacuum only—plastic-coated types are washable.
Grasscloth	Less durable than other coverings. Subtle textural effect.	Light-use areas. Lining paper recommended.	Wheat paste. Avoid over-soaking. Apply adhesive to wall.	Vacuum.