

# THE HOMEOWNERS JOURNAL

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## DON'T LET CONTRACTORS PAINT OVER THEIR SURPRISES

By **MARY DANIELS**

CHICAGO TRIBUNE

Homeowners have come to dread- and almost accept - the fact that hiring a painting contractor can bring a lot of stressful surprises to a project. The time it takes to complete the painting job can last longer than expected, the price can increase faster than a drop of paint can fall, and the finished project sometimes can leave much to be desired, says Jeff Hester, suburban estimator and superintendent for Hester Decorating, a Chicago based painting, faux-finishing and wall covering company.



The four generation, firm recently was honored with two awards from The Painting and Decorating Contractors of

America (PDCA). Dedicated to safety and hazard control in the workplace, Hester Decorating won the PDCA Safety Achievement Award. Hester offers these tips to guide homeowners before they hire a contractor.

**Apples to apples:** Have each contractor give you an estimate for the same services, including size of area to be painted type of paint, number of coats, preparation details, etc., so it will be easier to compare and choose. Make sure they use the right paint for the situation. Some contractors will use the cheapest paint to keep your price low, Hester says, adding that 89 percent of your cost is labor. Choose paint that is going to hold up and last. A good quality paint by a reputable manufacturer is going to cost \$30 to \$50 a gallon, but is worth it in the long run, he says.

**Prepare, prepare, prepare:** Preparation is just as important as the actual painting.

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## UNDERSTANDING EFFICIENCY RATINGS FOR CENTRAL AIR CONDITIONERS

**What is a SEER rating?**

The minimum energy efficiency level for central air conditioning systems made and sold in the United States is regulated by the U.S. Department of Energy (DOE). The efficiency level of a central air conditioner is determined by its "Seasonal Energy Efficiency Ratio" (SEER). This SEER rating is technically defined as the cooling output provided by the unit during its normal annual usage period divided by its total energy consumption. More simply, the SEER rating is similar to the miles-per-gallon rating for automobiles. The more

energy efficient the air conditioning equipment is, the higher the SEER rating because less electricity is needed to cool your home.

**What is the minimum SEER standard today?**

Since 1992, the minimum efficiency standard for central air conditioners and heat pumps has been set at 10 SEER. That's about to change. Beginning in January 2006, the minimum efficiency level for all new central air conditioners manufactured must be at least 13 SEER.

**What does the 13 SEER standard**

**mean for homeowners?**

The 13 SEER regulation does not affect a homeowner's current air conditioner. But the 13 SEER transition will affect homeowners and builders looking to purchase a new central air conditioner this year or next in several ways, including:

- Farewell to 10 to 12 SEER systems. Beginning January 23, 2006, central air conditioners rated at 10 to 12 SEER will no longer be manufactured. However, 10 and 12 SEER systems can

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**Paint** ...Continued from page 1

Ask each painting contractor about his or her preparation process. If your walls have cracks, holes, missing plaster, bubbling or other flaws, make sure the painting contractor plans to scrape, patch, sand, caulk and prime. Establish time guidelines as to when you expect the job to be finished. Note: If your home was built before 1978, you are likely to have lead paint issues, make sure the contractor is knowledgeable about determining lead paint presence and about sealing off the area to protect you, your family and your pets.

**Warranty warning:** Establish the details of the warranty before hiring someone, and make sure it is in writing. Some warranties cover labor and materials, while some only cover materials. Make sure the contractor is fully insured to cover: your home, furniture, artwork, etc., not just the room or rooms being worked on. Although damage to a

home can be as simple as a nick in the door-frame from a ladder, there is always the chance of something much more significant happening, such as a fire or water damage, putting the entire home at risk. Ask to see the contractor's certificate of insurance.

**Says who?** Ask for the names of previous customers, those who hired the contractor for a job of similar scope, and check out the finished product firsthand. Ask the customer, "Did the contractor live up to your expectations regarding the quality of work, cleanliness and timeline?" When the painters leave, you should not know that a painter was in the house except for the new paint on the walls.

**Telltale signs:** If it takes the contractor four days to call back about an estimate, take this as an omen. And, lastly, don't pay a contractor until he is finished and you are happy with the final product.

*"If your home was built before 1978, you are likely to have lead paint issues, make sure the contractor is knowledgeable about determining lead paint presence and about sealing off the area to protect you, your family and your pets."*

**SEER** ...Continued from page 1

continue to be sold and installed until inventory of these products is exhausted.

- Lower operating costs. An air conditioner rated at 13 SEER uses 30 percent less electricity than a 10 SEER system. The annual cost savings can range from \$22 for a small one-ton system to as high as \$110 for a large five-ton system (\$0.08/kilowatt hour cost). Annual cost savings are more if replacing a unit rated at 8 or 9 SEER and if electricity costs are higher than 8 cents/kwh.

- More advanced technology. New central air conditioners use more advanced technology and have more features to enhance efficiency, comfort, reliability and convenience. The latest

technologies include two-stage scroll compressors that deliver precise temperature and humidity control, and advanced programmable thermostats and diagnostic systems to operate and protect the system.

- Bigger systems. Air conditioners usually get larger in size as the SEER rating is increased. That's because to achieve a higher efficiency, manufacturers need to install more coil (i.e. copper or aluminum tubing) to more efficiently transfer heat. The use of high efficiency scroll compressors helps to hold down this size increase as the manufacturer does not need to add as much coil to meet their target efficiency.

- Expect to pay more. In general, the higher the SEER rating, the more it will cost to purchase a new air condi-

tioner. Higher efficiency systems tend to be larger and use more materials like steel, aluminum and copper; they are also more costly to manufacture, transport and install.

**How should homeowners use SEER ratings?**

When buying an air conditioner, it's generally recommended to select the highest SEER system you can afford. You may want to ask your contractor to calculate the payback period in which the new system will "pay for itself" in terms of lower utility bills. Sometimes the savings are enough to partially or fully offset the cost of the new system within a few years. This is an individual calculation provided by the contractor that factors in your home's size and the typical energy costs for your geographic area.

## CHECKING YOUR ROOF FOR WINTER DAMAGE

By JAMES QUARELLO

The snow is gone and the weather is warming, now is a good time to check your roof for winter damage. Snow and ice can wreak havoc with roof coverings. Shingles and flashings can be broken or loosened leading to water penetrating to the sheathing underneath. Ignoring a

problem now—even what appears to be a small one—will accelerate the need to reroof and can add hundreds of dollars to the cost of a new roof.

You can easily check your roof from the ground with a pair of binoculars, from a ladder at the roof edge or from windows that overlook roof sections. You should

not walk or go on the roof unless the roof pitch is a low enough to negotiate safely and you are comfortable walking on it.

Any components you see that appear to be damaged should be evaluated and repaired by a qualified contractor.