

Home Lawn and Garden

There are other alternatives

Caulking can be useful, but...

There are times when I think that caulking should be kept behind the counter and sold only with a prescription! Or that the purchaser of caulking should have to show a certificate from caulking class.

Caulking is so versatile. It is so versatile that many homeowners forget that many other superior and more appropriate materials exist, and that these materials perform better and last longer than caulking. I am referring to mortar, vinyl concrete patch, putty, plastic ABS cement and, believe it or not, drywall compound.

Although caulking abuse is often laughable, it is occasionally serious enough to devalue a home. On the lighter side, the standard handyman repair is often hidden from view under the kitchen sink. It usually consists of the black plastic pipe joints finger painted with gobs and streamers of caulking. Sometimes you'll discover the white streaks along the drainpipe where the "plumber" has tried to clean his fingers, or dispose of the excess caulking gushing from the gun while he frantically hunted for the pressure release mechanism.

One potentially serious misuse of caulking is over windows in a brick wall. There is a steel lintel taking the weight of the brick above the window. A common mistake is caulking the lintel to the brick. This prevents water from escaping from in or behind the brick. This results in rusting of the steel lintel. Because rust occupies 40 times the space that steel does, the immense force can easily crack the brick wall.

Also, on a more serious side, most of us are appalled to see cracks in masonry filled with caulking (usually white). Older homes often have cracks over arches, under windows, at the corners and so on.

When these have been filled with caulking, instead of fresh mortar, the building may appear to be in worse condition than it really is, and consequently, selling it can be more difficult. Purchasers often view the visible caulking scars as a warning of what may be hidden inside.

Another serious misuse that may devalue a house can originate from a simple misunderstanding at the hardware store. The purchaser may have been assured that "this caulking is good for windows". Consequently the caulking is used instead of putty to secure the glass in the window frame; to "repair" cracked glass; and as a draft stop all the way around the edge of double hung windows preventing them from being opened.

Even some professional builders have succumbed to the allure of caulking. Time constraints and the complex scheduling of the trades has led to a widespread use of caulking for chimney flashings. In new housing with masonry chimneys, the technique of choice has become to "stick" the flashing to the chimney, instead of imbedding it in mortar joints. The latter approach takes longer, and requires some co-operation between trades, but the job lasts for decades. The new way is fast and inexpensive, and will occasionally last more than 24 months. The homeowner, or someone hired by him, would be wise to check his chimney flashing annually. The alternative is to wait for the ceiling stain to appear. All flashings caulked to masonry are equally suspect.

Caulking is a wonderful and versatile material, if used appropriately...that is the answer!

—Contributed by Les Boothroyd RHI,
Boothroyd Home Inspection Services,
(905) 877-0832 or 1-800-575-2598

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