

## Q. Fixing Hairline Stucco Cracks

*The stucco siding on my client's recently remodeled home has developed some small cracks. My stucco sub wants to patch them with plastic stucco cement and then prime the walls with latex mortar primer, but I'm afraid the problem will resurface. Is there a better way to fix hairline cracks?*

**A.** *Ron Webber, a veteran plastering contractor in Orange, Calif., responds:* I do not recommend using plastic stucco cement — actually a blend of portland cement, silica sand, lime, and fillers to increase plasticity — for patching. It has a high water content and develops a lot of very small shrinkage cracks as it dries, which can cause a patch to break apart prematurely. A better approach is to repair dead hairline cracks — where the stucco is stable and the cracks don't change size or reappear — by dusting them with premixed, pigmented stucco. I pour dry stucco powder into a cup, then use a dry 1-inch brush to dab the powder into the cracks. Immediately after dusting, I brush any excess off the edges (to prevent buildup) and blend in the patch. Moisture from the night air will help the cement set up overnight.

This technique is quick and easy and gives me a better color match than a wet-mortar repair. Dusting allows me to blend the patch in with the existing texture; simply filling in the cracks tends to leave a telltale “snail trail” of different stucco textures.

If the cracks are live and reappearing, you will have

to take more extreme measures. For larger cracks, I mix up a stucco fog coat (pigmented stucco without the sand) and inject it into the crack with a large syringe. (I moisten the area around the crack with water beforehand.) I use a small chip brush as needed to brush away the excess buildup and mist the patch as it dries; this helps harden the cement and makes the mineral pigment more stable.

If the cracks are too small, though, the fog coat won't penetrate them very well and the patch won't be as strong. To avoid this, you can dig out the cracks, moisten the area around them, and then squeeze the wet stucco into the cracks. It helps to brush some diluted acrylic admix into the cracks to help with adhesion. You might need to scrape back some of the finish coat and retexture the stucco, but matching an existing texture is a repair that requires good hands. Again, misting water onto the patch as it dries helps a lot.

While I've seen other plasterers fill cracks with urethane caulking, it's not a method I use. Pigmented acrylics and urethanes might closely match the stucco when they are dry, but when it rains and the walls are wet, every patch will show up. This is because portland cement stucco absorbs water and darkens, while acrylics and urethanes don't. Of course, if the walls are painted, then the color difference won't be as obvious when it rains.

## Q. Squirrels and Cedar Siding

*We installed untreated cedar shingles on the exterior walls of a vacation home in central Maryland. Now the owners are complaining that squirrels are eating the new siding. And the squirrels really are eating it — they're not just trying to get inside the house. Is there anything we can apply to the siding to discourage them?*

**A.** *Bill Feist, formerly a wood-finishes researcher with the Forest Products Laboratory in Madison, Wis., and co-author of Finishes for Exterior Wood, responds:* There are no cures for squirrel problems that are totally effective in all situations, so you may have to do some experimenting. One possible solution is to use a “taste repellent” containing thiram, a fungicide registered with the EPA

for general use. Repellents containing thiram at a concentration of at least 1-to-25 have been reported to be effective on squirrels. Another repellent you could try is Ro-pel (508/888-0606, squirrel-x.com), which can be found online as well as at some garden stores. Ro-pel gives whatever it is sprayed on a very bitter taste, which may help curb the squirrels' appetite.

One of the capsaicin-based repellents used in birdseed also might be effective. Capsaicin — the compound found in chili peppers that puts the “hot” in hot sauce — has long been registered with the EPA as an animal repellent that won't cause unreasonable adverse effects in people or on the environment. Miller Hot Sauce Animal Repellent (800/233-2040, millerchemical.com) contains 2.5 percent

## Q&A

(by weight) capsaicin and is a taste-based repellent registered for use on ornamentals and fruit and nut trees. Squirrel Away (squirrel-x.com), a capsaicin-based powdered concentrate, is one of the birdseed supplements. Check with your local garden centers to see which capsaicin-based products they stock — and be sure to follow all label directions when using these (or any other) repellents.

As a very last resort, you could try

protecting the siding with physical barriers. (For aesthetic reasons, many homeowners won't consider this a realistic option.) To shield corners and edges, apply metal drywall corner bead or staple up 4- to 8-inch-wide strips of hardware cloth bent 90 degrees. If the squirrels are concentrating on a small area of siding, try covering it with the wire mesh — though the squirrels will most likely just move on to an unprotected area.

### Q. Deep Traps

*My client's kitchen sink has a shallow 6-inch-deep bowl, and the drain connection is located in the wall rather than the floor. She would like to replace the sink with one that has a much deeper bowl, but that will place the bottom of the bowl at nearly the same level as the drain opening. Is it okay to use a deeper trap and the same drain opening, or will the drain opening need to be moved to accommodate the deeper sink?*

**A.** *Mike Casey, a licensed plumbing contractor and co-author of Code Check Plumbing, responds:* When a trap is too shallow, the trap seal — the slug of water that remains in the trap and blocks sewer gas from entering the house — is more likely to evaporate. When the trap is too deep, liquid may flow through it too fast, which can lead to siphoning of the trap seal and sludge buildup.

To prevent these problems, plumbing codes require that the water seal in a trap be between 2 and 4 inches deep (2006 IRC,



The drain connection at the wall is too high on this sink, resulting in a 9-inch-deep trap seal — 5 inches deeper than is allowed by code.

P3201.2). If installing a sink with a deeper bowl results in a trap seal deeper than 4 inches, you'll have to open up the wall and relocate the trap arm connection at the drain (see photo, above). Remember, too, that the trap arm on the discharge side of a trap must be at least two pipe diameters long and should slope  $\frac{1}{4}$  inch per foot toward the vertical discharge (2006 IRC, P3105.3).

### GOT A QUESTION?

Send it to Q&A, *JLC*, 186 Allen Brook Lane, Williston, VT 05495; or e-mail to [jlc-editorial@hanleywood.com](mailto:jlc-editorial@hanleywood.com).

