

Journal

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HOW AND WHEN TO BUY THAT NEW ROOF

by Richard Tippett

Too many people seem to approach the purchase of roofing as though they were entering a fantasy land where nothing was understandable and only the roofing contractors, the wizards of the land, possessed knowledge of the mysteries. Such is not the case. Roofing, in general, is easily understood by following basic rules of engineering and economics. Roofing is frequently sold by men with little more than a high school education, and all roofing can be skillfully installed by mechanics with less than an eighth-grade diploma. Most homeowners, who are generally better educated and more experienced in business than many roofing contractors, have a distinct negotiating advantage if they only exercise the good judgment that they use in everyday living.

All that is needed is to be willing to become as knowledgeable about the type of roof that you want as you would about any other major purchase. In fact, roofs are far easier to understand than are refrigerators, stereos or a family car.

Roofs are a consumer commodity like appliances or other "durable goods." People who own their own homes will find it necessary to purchase a new roof at least twice, and maybe three or four times, during their lives—which is about as often as one purchases a new refrigerator, or washing machine, or household furniture. When buying

roofing, always remember to ask the same questions that you ask when making any other major investment:

- How long do I want it to last?
- Is it made by a reputable manufacturer?
- Does it come with a good guarantee?
- Does it meet my aesthetic needs?
- Am I being overcharged for it?

There may also be other questions that you ask when making major purchases; if so, feel free to add them to the list. Roofs are a major purchase and, as Bill Cosby so succinctly put it, "It's your money." Above all, you should feel comfortable making the purchase.

Keep asking questions until the contractor's answers put your mind at ease. If a contractor is unable to do so, you may want to talk to another contractor.

Here are a few "guideline" answers you should be looking for when you ask the questions above:

1. How long do I want it to last?—

The most cost-effective roofs are those that are built to last twenty years or longer. For this quality of construction you will pay a small initial premium that is more than compensated for by not having to buy a second roof after only ten or twelve years.

For flat roofs this means buying at least a four-ply gravel-surfaced roof or a three-ply modified bitumen roof. A minimum ten-year roofing manufactur-

er's guarantee should also be purchased. Any added crickets or insulation necessary to ensure that the roof drains freely should be added during reroofing. This is required under most current building codes. The existing roofing should ideally be removed before installing the new roof.

For existing shake, wood shingle or composition roofs a new roof means removing the existing roof and replacing it with fire-retardant heavy wood shakes or with various types of "twenty-five year," "thirty year," or "forty year" composition shingles or synthetic shakes. Your new roof should be attached with nails, not staples.

Concrete or clay tile roofs of all types generally need only repairs or, at worst, removal and reinstallation over solid sheathing and a new felt underlayment. Such roofs generally do not need any serious attention other than cleaning for their first thirty years. If they do require attention, something is wrong with the way in which they were constructed.

Foam roofs should be purchased with the awareness that they will require regular recoating at five to seven year intervals. The additional cost of this regular maintenance should be added to their lower initial cost when doing cost comparisons with other forms of roofing. With this regular maintenance, foam roofs will last thirty years or better.

2. Is it made by a reputable manufacturer?—There are very few scurrilous material manufacturers in the California homeowner market. You can generally eliminate this as an area of concern if the product you are considering has been in use for more than five years.

"Manufacture" of a roof is actually in the hands of the roofing contractor, who assembles it in place on your building. His reputation is very important to you. Ask for references and check them. These references should be homeowners associations of similar size to your own for whom the contractor performed work two or more years ago. Don't bother with references less than a year old; the roofs haven't yet had time to develop problems.

It is an old adage in the roofing industry that seventy-five percent of roofing companies do not survive their first five years in business. If you are interested in having a company younger than five years construct your roof, be certain they can provide a material manufacturer's guarantee covering both the material installed and their quality of workmanship.

To check a company's financial stability, ask them from whom they buy their material and for how long. Call that supplier, verify the length of the business relationship, and also whether or not the contractor's bills are paid in a timely manner. If the contractor has been buying from a present supplier for less than six months, find out the name of the previous supplier, call that supplier and ask the same questions.

Finally, prequalify more than one contractor in this manner; and, when you have a list of three or more that appear to you to be reputable and financially stable, contact all of them and request a bid on your work. Be sure to tell them that they are competing with others for your work. This does much to ensure that your answer to the final question will be "no."

Be aware that the urethane foam roofing industry has seen a tremendous shakeout in the last five years, with several contractors going out of business and some new ones appearing. If you are contemplating the purchase of a foam roof, we strongly suggest that you retain a consultant knowledgeable in foam roofing to assist you in contractor selec-

tion. The rewards of foam roofing can be high, and the risks are concomitant.

3. Does it come with a good guarantee?—All built-up roofing should be purchased with, at minimum, a ten year unconditional material manufacturer's guarantee on both labor and material. Run, do not walk, away from any contractor who tries to talk you out of such a guarantee. You will pay a very small premium for this, and it is well worth it, particularly if, for whatever reason, the contractor who installed your roof goes out of business.

Composition shingle roofing can be purchased with manufacturer's guarantees of up to forty years. Again, prudence dictates the purchase of at least a twenty-five year guarantee.

Fire retardant shake roofing comes with guarantees of up to twenty-five years from the manufacturers. Here, the reputation of the roofing contractor and his length of time in business under the same management is also important, as is the use of galvanized nails for shake attachment. The Red Cedar Shingle and Handsplit Shake Bureau (a trade organization in Tacoma, Washington) will gladly provide homeowners with a wealth of information on how these roofs are correctly built. Be sure all metal flashings, valleys and gutters are replaced during reroofing, and ask your contractor for at least a five-year guarantee on his labor and material.

Synthetic shake roofing guarantees vary by manufacturer and should be individually investigated. None of these products (with one exception) has been in use for more than seven years, and their highly touted guarantees generally cover material failures only. Also be sure that the material you are considering can be used on your climate. Some synthetic shakes cannot be used in snow country, for example. Again, insist on at least a five-year guarantee from your roofing contractor on both his labor and his material.

Urethane foam roofing and coatings should be purchased with ten year or five-year-renewable guarantees.

4. Does it meet my aesthetic needs?—Only you can answer this question. For whatever type of roofing you are considering, a variety of patterns, colors and textures are available. Ask the contractors you are considering to show you

what they have available. You may be pleasantly surprised.

5. Am I being overcharged for it?—If you are planning on constructing your roof in the months of September through March, the answer will generally be "Yes," even if you obtain competitive bids. This is the busiest season for roofing contractors. They can pick and choose their work and will often submit unrealistically high bids, "trolling," as they put it, "for loose change" and desperate buyers.

If you are planning on building your roof in the months of April through July and have gone out for competitive bids to three or more contractors, the answer will very probably be a reassuring "No." An excellent way to buy roofing is to solicit bids during the winter months for work to be performed as soon as rains stop in the spring.

One final word of caution: be wary of any contractor who represents himself as the sole source of a particular roofing product or promotes a particular product as the only solution to your roofing needs. The corollary to such a presentation is an unrealistically high price and, often, an overrated roofing system. There are always other sources for roofing products or other products that will meet your roofing needs. As with cars and carpets, remember to shop around and shop carefully to get the best product at the best prices for your needs.

Richard Tippett is the principal of ERTECH/ Applied Roofing Technology, Aromas, CA. He is a member of ECHO's Maintenance and Central Coast Resource Panels.