



Paintbrushes Pro Tips for Choosing, Using, and Cleaning

BY SCOTT BURT

Chances are, at some point in your career, you'll have to do the paint work on one of your jobs. It could be that you won't be able to find a pro who has time for your job, or maybe you'll be over budget and have no money to hire an outside painting contractor. Or maybe you've just always wondered how the pros brush out a finish that looks as perfect as a spray job.

If any of those scenarios are familiar, this article is a good starting point. Brush selection is key. Buying a good brush starts with the finish you'll be applying and where you'll be applying it. But getting good results goes beyond choosing the right paintbrush. You also have to learn the techniques for efficiently laying down a good

finish, some of which I'll cover here. And of course, if you want to be able to use that \$15 to \$20 brush again and again, knowing how to clean it is also important.

WHAT MAKES A GOOD BRUSH

The essential function of the paintbrush is to hold and release paint, and there are three components—handle, ferrule, and bristles—that determine how well that happens.

Handle. If you're holding a paintbrush for any length of time, you want a comfortable handle. If you can't grip a brush comfortably, it will show in the entry and exit of your brush strokes, which



are what make a smooth finished surface. On better brushes, the handle is generally made of a lightweight hardwood. Usually, the wood is unfinished, which is easier to grip than wood that has a glossy finish.

Some marine-grade brushes made for clear varnishes and urethanes have an easy-to-clean glossy handle. At the other end of the spectrum, cheaper, plastic-handled brushes are usually throw-away tools—used, for example, to oil a deck and then tossed out.

I prefer brushes with a 7- to 8-inch-long, unfinished handle. For close-in detail work, such as cutting in interior trim, I choke up my grip on the brush, with my finger tips gripping the metal ferrule close to the bristles (1). But when I'm laying on a lot of paint, such as on exterior siding, I hold the brush further out on the handle (2). That extra length is also handy for extending my reach.

The ferrule is the corrosion-resistant metal band at the center of the brush that connects the handle to the bristles. Inside the ferrule, the bristle pack is set in epoxy at the base of the handle. On some brushes, the bristles may be internally wrapped in a concealed aluminum band within the external ferrule cladding.

Good brushes have a wooden or cardboard spacer—known as the plug—inserted in the ferrule housing to divide the bristle pack into two sections. The plug (or plugs) creates a paint well that holds paint and allows it to flow to the tips of the bristles. This well has more volume toward the handle and gradually tapers down toward the

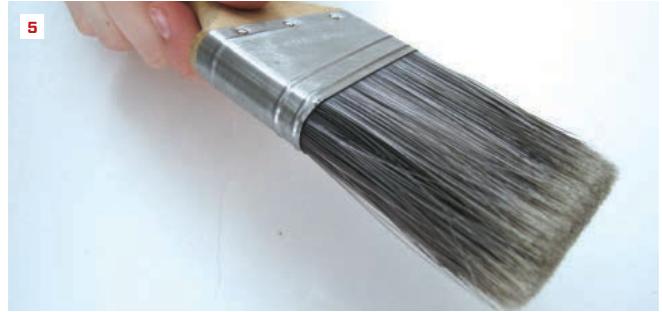
tip of the brush. Along with the bristles themselves, the size and shape of the well determine how the brush holds (not drips) and releases paint. The quality and interplay of components define the basic differences between a really good brush and a cheaper one. A loaded brush can weigh several pounds, so sound construction and ergonomics are important considerations.

Bristles. Synthetic bristles are the most popular option these days. In the not-so-distant past—before water-based finishes became the norm—natural-hair bristles made from hogs or oxen were used in the best brushes. But natural-hair bristles can swell when used with water-based finishes, making the brush unusable for most work.

Today, the best brushes are made from blends of synthetic nylon and polyester bristles. In fact, for the majority of today's finishes, there is no need to buy a natural-bristle brush.

A brush with all-nylon bristles is too flexible and soft for fine work, and all-polyester bristles are too stiff and don't hold paint well. The right blend of bristles can spread paints and primers well and can also work in stains and urethanes without shedding, decomposing, hardening, or swelling. For most painting jobs, it is better to have a slightly stiffer brush than too soft of a brush.

A stiff brush with some flex lets you jam paint into spots where it's needed, without flattening out. Good synthetic brushes flex and change shape well, but they also return consistently to their origi-



nal form. Also, unlike natural-bristle brushes, they don't shed or shorten much with repeated use. The business end of a synthetic bristle is frequently tipped (shaved down to a sharper point) and flagged like a split end (3), giving the tip of the brush the very best ability to spread paint. The back 80% of the bristle pack holds and releases paint to the bristle tips.

SIZE MATTERS BUT SHAPE MATTERS MORE

When I check out how well a brush might work for me, the first thing I look at is the ferrule design.

Ferrule design. In cross-section, ferrules have one of three shapes: squared corners with parallel sides, rounded corners with parallel sides, or oval. I use all three types, depending on the job I'm doing. The shape of the ferrule defines the shape and thickness of the bristle pack. Different ferrule shapes hold and release paint in different ways, and your selection should be based on an understanding of what it is that you want to accomplish.

Brushes with square-cornered ferrules tend to be narrow (4), and they don't hold as much paint as ones with rounded corners. This is desirable for tight cuts and small surfaces where not much paint is needed. They are like pointers.

I would use a brush with a thicker, round-cornered ferrule (5) for most situations where I am both cutting precision lines and wanting to spread paint quickly.

A brush with a larger, oval-shaped ferrule (6) will hold more paint, allowing for a longer pull on larger surfaces before needing to be reloaded with paint. Typically, I'd use one of these brushes for open-road paint spreading where there is some cutting, but there are no precision or detailed cuts.

Width is critical. While the components described above help to determine the thickness, general shape, and material hold and release characteristics of the brush, the width of the brush is also critical. This choice is usually made based on the task at hand. Most commonly, brushes come in ½-inch increments, from 1 to 4 inches.

If a brush is too large for the task, it is difficult to do precise and detailed work. Typically, inexperienced painters buy brushes that are too large for the job. On the other hand, if a brush is too small, the project will take longer, and the surface will appear overly brushed, resulting in a flashy look where the paint doesn't lay down and level out.

Paints dry quickly these days, so finding the right balance between quality and production is essential. Your siding doesn't need to be cabinet grade, and you don't want cabinets to look like siding. Your brush doesn't know the difference, so you need to.

Success is not always a function of a brush's width. I can spread paint faster, cleaner, and more efficiently with a fat, oval 2-inch brush than with a skinny, square-ferruled 3-inch brush. The 3-inch



will pull a wider stroke, but the 2-inch will move more material. Brushing is a game of laying out material efficiently and getting it level in the fewest number of moves possible.

ANGLED OR STRAIGHT BRISTLES

Traditional brushes are available with the ends of the bristles angled or parallel to the leading edge of the ferrule.

Angled brushes are easiest to use when cutting lines, because they lend themselves well to “pointing” and pulling out lines. They work really well on edge (7) when cutting wall paints into ceilings or trim casings (8). They are also great for brushing installed siding, where some cutting is required, but moving lots of paint is the top priority.

Straight brushes, also known as flat brushes, are the better choice for laying out paint on larger, flat surfaces when cutting is minimal. Also, straight brushes are best for not leaving bristle marks (9). A good example of where you would use these is cabinet-grade panel work, where the finish needs to be applied with a brush, but look as if it were sprayed.

MY PERSONAL FAVORITES

Surfaces to be brushed can vary from drywall, to cabinets, to rough exterior siding, or even concrete. A brush doesn't have to specialize in any of them, as long as it works well on all of them. Prep work is important because the smoother and cleaner the

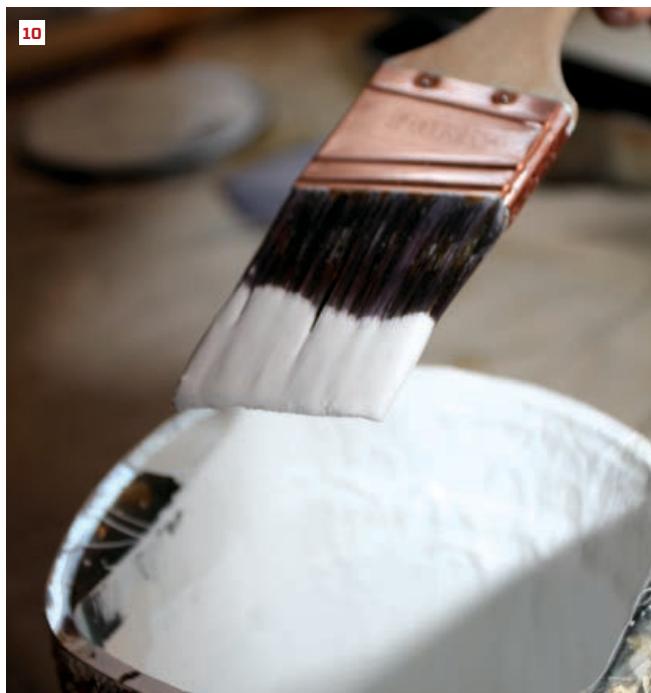
surface, the more the brush will glide across the surface.

Brushes are like hammers: It's almost impossible to own just one, but you always have a favorite. By far my No. 1, desert-island brush that I always need within reach is 2 inches wide and has a rounded-corner ferrule and angled-cut bristles. It's a brush that's capable of both interior and exterior work with latex/waterborne paints and primers. Using it, I can cut where needed (I'm nutty about cutting), and I can also flat-brush broad surfaces. It's the brush that will solve the most problems on any given day. I like the Purdy Pro Extra or XL Elite series (purdy.com).

My second choice would be a 2 ½-inch-wide, oval-ferrule, angled-cut-bristle brush that I use where I need to do less detailed cutting and have a bit more open road to spread paint faster and heavier. This is a brush that I could use on anything from exterior siding to interior trim. My choice here is the Proform Picasso (proformtech.com). It is not a cutting specialist, but rather a good, all-around mover of paint that cleans well. Lifespan for the Proform brushes isn't quite as long as for the Purdy brushes, but it's tolerable. When Picassos aren't available, this spot can easily be filled by a Purdy of the same shape and size.

My third favorite is a 3-inch-wide, straight-cut, rounded-corner-ferrule brush that I use where there is very little cutting and just plain, open road of finish that needs to lay down.

The fourth brush in my kit is a 1- or 1½-inch-wide brush with a square-corner ferrule and angled-cut bristles. We refer to brushes



like this as “snipers,” because they get into tight spots when there is no room for error. The day you needed one, but didn’t have it, you would pay twice the retail for one. The same can be said for a small artist brush, which is worth its weight in gold.

BRUSHING TECHNIQUES

Loading a brush with paint is about getting the bristles wet one-half to two-thirds of their length **(10)**, and then either tapping on two sides of the can, or dipping and then wiping on the rim. I rarely wipe, because it seems redundant to me to load the brush and then put all that paint back in the can. I want to load the brush, then take all that paint to the wall for distribution, which is why the brush has to be designed to hold paint well. So I dip and slap, filling the inner well of the bristle pack—to the point of almost dripping. The vigor of the tap you make inside the can determines how much paint the brush ends up holding.

You should never brush from a full gallon can; I rarely carry more than a third of a gallon when working from one. For smaller-scale tasks, I also like to use a Handy Pail (bercomincorporated.com), because of its disposable liners and the magnet that holds a brush suspended in paint when it’s not being used **(11)**. (It’s important to never let your brush dry out.)

The first move at the wall is always to unload the brush in the first pass, then move the paint exactly where and how you want it, working toward your last stroke. Many painters need to be re-

minded to reduce the number of moves to a consistent minimum in the act of loading and spreading paint from a brush.

CARE AND LIFESPAN

Brush lifespan varies with how much it’s used and how well it’s maintained. I expect two to three months of daily use from a brush. Over time, brushes lose their sharpness and start to splay out from their original shape. At that point, they live out their retirement brushing dust or spot priming.

Today’s paints are generally fast-drying, and sometimes excess paint will cake and dry on the top half of the bristles where they enter the ferrule. I often clean my brush at lunchtime, or even sooner, to avoid contamination from dried paint falling off the ferrule or upper bristles into a just-brushed surface.

By emptying the brush on your work surface before cleaning, you need less water for cleanup. Two to 3 quarts of warm water is generally enough. Start by pressing your brush into the bottom of the pail, then reach in for a series of squeezes. As the paint liquefies, it is possible to squeeze most of it out of the brush. Then rinse it with clean water and shake it out completely so that no water runs in the brush when you resume painting.

Do not pour wastewater down the drain where it can clog a septic system’s filters or weaken the natural bacteria in septic tanks. Also, never dump paint waste in the yard. The best method for wastewater management is at your jobsite dumpster. Pour the

Photos: Andrew Wornier



wastewater from your cleanup pails onto the piles of scrap wood and sawdust in the dumpster. This is a convenient and effective filtration system, as the solids will separate and dry out, while the small quantity of water is quickly absorbed by the rest of your porous jobsite waste.

Some guys do the “boot tap,” where they slam the brush against the toe of their shoe or some other object to dry the bristles. Brushes don’t appreciate this treatment at all; it’s a great way to weaken the ferrule.

For end-of-the-day cleaning, empty the brush as completely as possible by unloading it on your work surface. Then, press the entire length of the bristles from the top down with both thumbs. Use a second bucket with cleaner water after the initial cleaning. Keep flipping the brush over and working out the paint until only clean water exits the brush as you rinse. Run a brush comb through the bristles to make sure they are all straight (12). Avoid using wire brushes to clean paintbrushes. If your brush is getting that messy, a change of habits is in order.

Some painters like to use a brush spinner—a specialized tool for removing cleaning solvents and drying the bristles. Centrifugal force flings away the solvent and dries the bristles quickly. I don’t like brush spinners, except maybe for drying the bristles on a large

exterior brush. Spinners tend to splay out the bristles, making the brush lose its shape.

After a couple of good, final shakeouts, I return the clean and slightly moist brush to its case to preserve its shape and keep it clean and protected (13). Store brushes at room temperature and avoid letting them freeze in the truck between uses. When you open the brush case, you want the bristles to feel soft, moist, straight, and tight. If any bristles have become bent out of shape, trim them with scissors.

Cleaning a brush that’s been used in a solvent-based finish is more complex, mainly because you can’t just dump out the paint thinner you’ve used. I use three different buckets. Bucket three has the dirtiest thinner and the solid wastes that I’ve poured off from bucket two, which is where the majority of the cleaning takes place. Bucket one has the cleanest thinner and is only used for a final rinse. When the thinner in bucket one gets too dirty, I pour it into bucket two. Everything in bucket three can be allowed to dry out, then disposed of properly as waste. Many municipalities have special days during the year when they accept dried paint and dirty thinner at their waste and trash processing centers.

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Photos: 11 & 13, Andrew Wormer; 12, Tim Healey