Tips & Techniques

Tips & Techniques is a forum for readers to exchange information about methods, tools and jigs they've devised. We'll pay for any we publish. Send details to Tips, Fine Homebuilding, *P. O. Box 5506, Newtown, CT 06470-5506.*

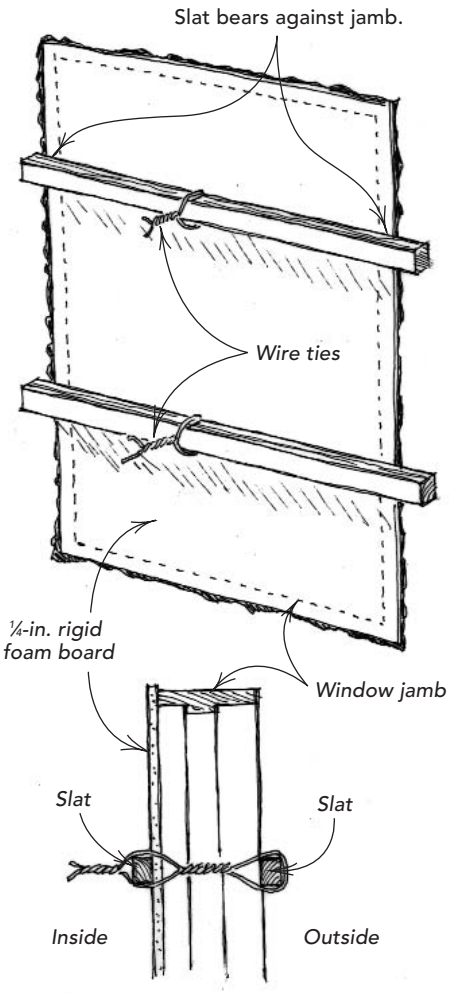
edited and illustrated by Charles Miller

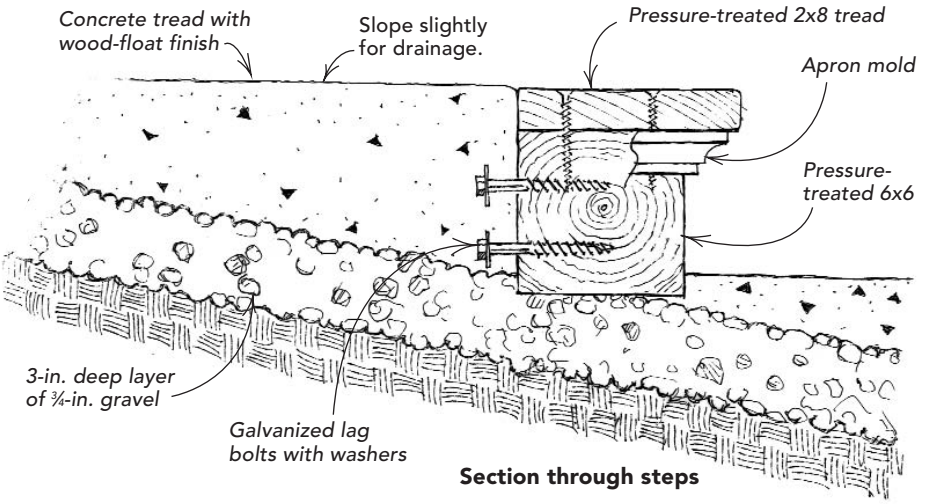
Protecting open windows

When the painters came to finish the windows in the huge house I was working on, one of them, Jon, used a clever method for closing off the window openings when the sash were out. This tip helps a lot when winter winds are bearing down.

As shown in the drawing below, he cuts a piece of ¼-in. rigid foam board into a panel large enough to bear on the window jambs. Then he secures the panel with pairs of slats on the interior and exterior held together by a twisted tie wire that pokes through the foam panel. It's a quick, easy, thoughtful way to keep out the cold.

—Jon Sherman, Steamboat Springs, CO

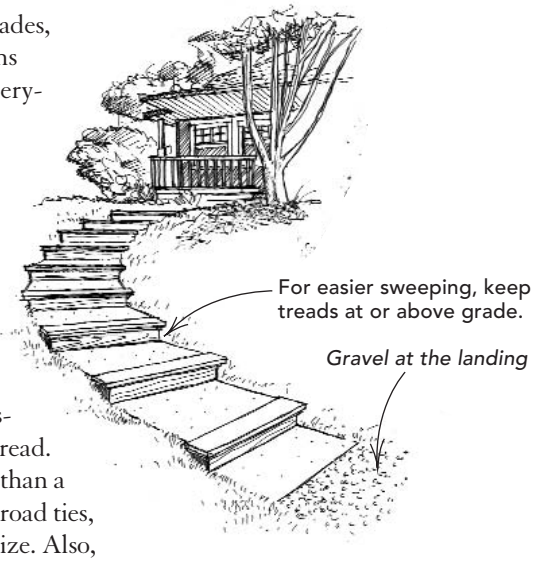




Section through steps

Durable outdoor steps

Over my 50-plus years in the trades, I've built plenty of outdoor paths with steps in them. I've used everything from railroad ties to flat rocks for steps, and I've seen what holds up in our Ohio winters and what doesn't. The drawing at right shows my most recent refinement of what I've learned.



This design has three important points. First, I use pressure-treated 6x6s for the risers, with a screwed-down 2x8 tread. The 6x6s are more presentable than a bunch of creosote-dripping railroad ties, and they are more uniform in size. Also, the 2x8 treads can be replaced from time to time if necessary, and they provide some toe-space overhang.

The second key point is drainage. The steps should be sloped downward at about ⅛ in. per ft. to prevent puddles. I also build the steps atop a 3-in. deep layer of ¾-in. gravel, which lessens the chance of frost heaving the steps in winter.

The third detail is to keep the treads at or above grade, if possible. If they are lower than grade, it's tougher to sweep them clean of leaves and snow.

For this job, I had a 63-in. fall from the front step of the house to the driveway. The grade was too steep for a continuous pour and too shallow for standard 10-in. treads. So the owner and I decided to create a path made up of nine 7-in. risers between 24-in. treads, arranged in a curve. We draped a hose across the lawn to make sure that the curve had a pleasing sweep to it. When we were satisfied, I made up a long bending board and staked it along the curve for a place to measure and locate each tread.

I used an edger to soften the corners of the concrete portions of each tread. And I finished their tops with a wood float to create a rough texture. Each tread took about two wheelbarrows full of concrete. Galvanized lag bolts in the back of each 6x6 lock the risers and the concrete together. I decided to dress up each tread with pressure-treated apron mold and finished the job by staining the wood with a deep-brown wood preservative.

—Clyde R. Kennedy, Rushville, OH

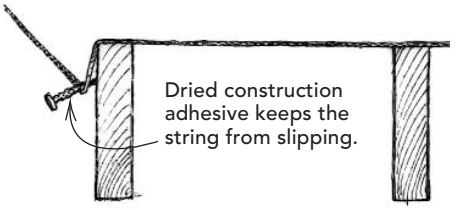
Tarps for pressure-washing

Pressure-washing flaking paint off siding can leave millions of unsightly paint chips strewn around a building. There's no good way to pick up any but the largest pieces. One client was adamant that he didn't want any chips around his home. I planned to lay down tarps to collect the chips when we hand-scraped, but the tarps would be flooded by the water during the preliminary wash. To catch the flakes and let the water pass through, I spread some landscaping fabric left over from another project about 6 ft. out from the house. Although the water puddled up initially, it passed through shortly after we shut off the equipment, and it caught even the tiniest particles.

—Mike Guertin, East Greenwich, RI

Stringline anchors

I stumbled on a trick that finds a purpose for those 12d sinkers we use to cork a tube of construction adhesive. Once the adhesive



has dried to a hard, rubbery shell, the nails make great stringline anchors. The adhesive coating helps to keep the string from slipping while I tighten and loop it.

—Chris Hofmann, Gaithersburg, MD

The armored snake

Being a general contractor (and one-man band), I frequently run into situations that require either wasting a lot of time running down specific tools or making do with whatever is at hand.

Recently, I had to add a light in a hallway as part of a remodel. Because the light was to go on the first floor and I had the upstairs flooring torn off, I thought it would be a simple matter to drop the switch leg down one of the stud bays and wire the switch.

Downstairs, I cut the drywall for the switch box. Much to my amazement, this interior wall was stuffed with fiberglass insulation. It was evidently installed to deaden the sound from the bathroom on the other side of the wall. I went back upstairs and tried to push a fish tape through the insulation. No such luck. I needed something flexible yet sturdy enough to bore its way through the fiberglass.

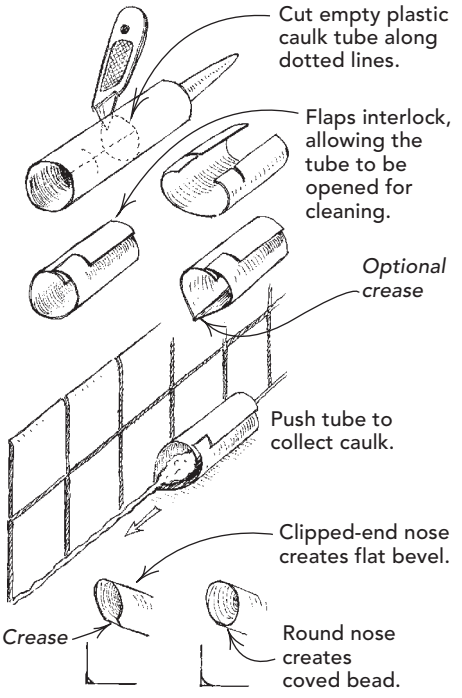
Looking around the site, I spotted a leftover length of BX cable—the armored type of electrical wire used in exposed locations. I fed the BX through the insulation from above, and in just a few seconds, it popped out right where I wanted it. The BX became the fish tape I needed to pull the switch leg.

—John Horger, Twin Peaks, CA

Free caulk-finishing tool

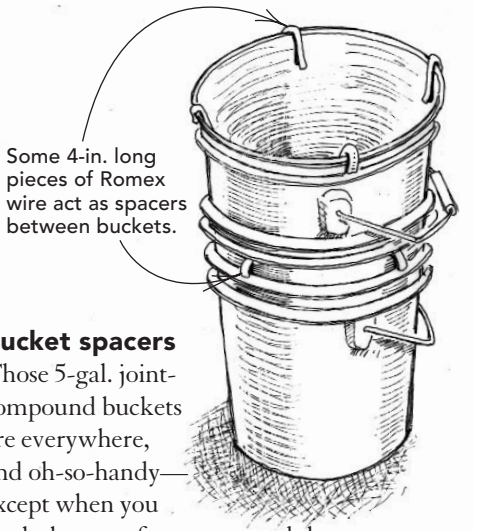
My favorite caulk-finishing tool isn't my finger, I didn't pay for it, and it doesn't involve ending up with gobs of caulk stuck to rags. As shown in the drawing below, I transform a spent plastic caulk tube into a custom-made tool.

First, I cut the tube in half, split it up the middle and cut slots on both sides. Splitting the tube in half allows me to put a crease in the tube, which can come in handy for some caulk profiles. You can clip the end of



the tool to create a flat bevel finish or leave it round for a coved finish. The interlocking flaps allow the tube to be opened for periodic cleaning.

—Vincent C. Pirrone, Sparks, NV



Bucket spacers

Those 5-gal. joint-compound buckets are everywhere, and oh-so-handy—except when you stack them up for storage and they seem to glue themselves together. The drawing above shows my easy way to keep them stacked yet easy to separate.

I cut scraps of Romex wire, which is pretty much available on any job site, into 4-in. lengths and bend them into J-shaped hooks. I loop the hooks over the rim of a bucket, with the long ends inside. Four or five will do it. Now I can stack buckets to my heart's content.

—Dennis Rowe, North Hills, CA

Centering the ladder load

After getting my new 32-ft. aluminum extension ladder home, I struggled to haul it around the yard to complete a painting project. Whether using it as two separate 16-ft. sections or as an extension ladder, I found it mighty awkward to carry. Try as I might to estimate the midpoint when lifting it, I always would get it wrong. Eventually, trial-and-error repositioning of the lifting point allowed me to pick up the ladder without one end digging into the ground.

To solve this problem, I first separated the two sections. Placing each on a sawhorse, perpendicular to the crossbar, I quickly found the balance points. I marked them with a spray-painted fluorescent orange line across the side rails of each section.

Now when I pick up either section, I know that I am grabbing it exactly in the middle. Best of all, when the sections are back together, the lines still act to indicate the center. No matter how far the ladder is extended, the lines on the sections are only a few feet apart. It is easy to eyeball the midpoint between the two lines and to grab the ladder at the midpoint every time.

—Jim Parker, Littleton, CO