Beautiful Trim from Plywood

It's a stable and less-expensive alternative to solid wood

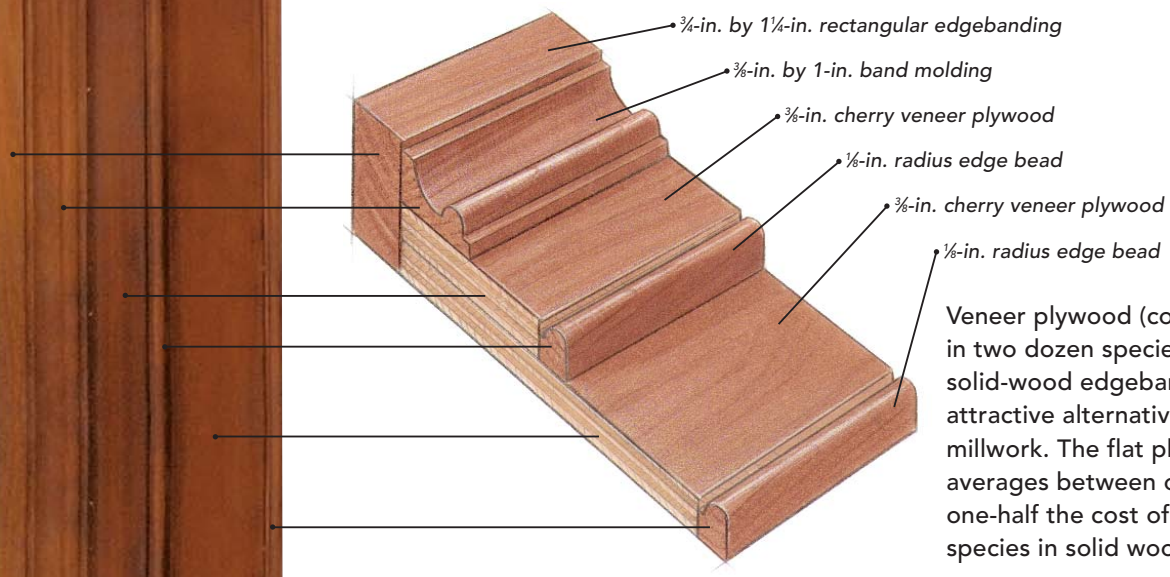
BY MICHAEL STANDISH

Prices are up, but hardwood-lumber quality is down. If you're disappointed with this state of affairs but still want good-looking trim in your house, you might want to investigate engineered products, such as veneer plywood.

Because of its balanced, cross-ply construction (that is, thin layers of wood with lots of glue to restrain them), veneer plywood is not susceptible to the mutating forces that bedevil ordinary lumber.

Genuinely warped or twisted plywood is difficult to produce unless you leave a sheet of it out in the rain. Swaybacked plywood, resulting from careless storage practices such as deep stacks or inadequate support, is corrected easily by slight hand pressure during assembly. If need be, any unwanted set can be reversed with

THE LAYERS REVEALED



Veneer plywood (commonly available in two dozen species) edged with solid-wood edgebanding creates an attractive alternative to off-the-shelf millwork. The flat plywood stock averages between one-third and one-half the cost of the same species in solid wood.

Drawings: Bob La Pointe

THREE WAYS TO HIDE THE EDGES

When using plywood as trim, you'll need to cover the edges in most cases. You can do so in one of three ways: solid-wood edgebanding (square-edged stock or molding), a mitered plywood return, or veneer edgebanding (pressure-sensitive or iron-on).

Solid-wood edgebanding can be glued on, nailed on, or both to cover plywood's visible layers. A ¼-in.-thick solid-maple nosing was added to the window stool in the photo to protect the vulnerable edge. To protect the plywood's thin veneer (photo right), plane the edgebanding down to the tape, then switch to sandpaper.



A mitered return cut from the same piece of plywood stock eliminates color-matching problems when staining. Small returns such as this one are often just glued in place.



Iron-on veneer edgebanding must contact the plywood edge completely for thorough adhesion. Clean-up is best with a file (10-in. to 12-in. mill bastard) held at about 5°; veneer saws are clumsy, and knives sometimes follow the grain.









Marker tip
When only a narrow plywood edge is visible, a brown marker can color the exposed edge and save you the trouble of banding the edge.

MAKE PLYWOOD TRIM IN A VARIETY OF SPECIES

Because they're readily available, common or exotic species of plywood can be substituted for solid wood. Above are three window-trim examples, from simple to more complex, in pine, mahogany, and oak.

the process of strategic clamping, or "training" it back to flat.

Finally, veneer-core plywood is stable in another important way. It is far less sensitive than solid wood to fluctuations in humidity, and it expands or contracts only a third as much as Honduras mahogany, a species notorious for staying put.

Plywood also is significantly less expensive. At current local prices, using solid material instead of paint-grade birch or maple plywood means tripling my materials costs, including veneer edging. Hardwood lumber costs me at least twice as much as an equivalent amount of same-species plywood.

But using plywood is not all roses

To be fair, however, at about 75 lb., a ¾-in. thick, 4x8 plywood sheet is bulky and heavy. Breaking down a full panel with a circular saw or a tablesaw without side and outfeed support can be awkward and slow.

There also are indirect costs. You may have to purchase full sheets, forcing you to store more material than you want. Some suppliers sell partial sheets, but this seeming benefit usually comes with a surcharge, which can be hefty. Also, lengths beyond 8 ft. typically are a special-order item, and any savings gained in materials tends to evaporate.

Another downside is that face veneers are normally no thicker than ½ in., making veneer-plywood trim too delicate for use in barrooms or fraternity houses. Where trim work will receive merely normal levels of abuse (e.g., outside baseboard corners), veneered material is still not the best choice. For other trim applications such as window and door trim or moldings that are located off the floor, however, this fragility doesn't come into play.

Finally, unless striped edges are a design element, they must be concealed. It takes time to apply even the simplest banding, such as iron-on or pressure-sensitive veneer tape, but not much more than removing saw marks from lumber.

Wood moldings such as backbanding, either plain or with a profile, are applied to the edges of plywood in much the same manner as solid wood. These moldings, either store bought or made with routers and tablesaws, are nailed and sometimes glued to stable plywood edges. □

Michael Standish is a carpenter living in West Roxbury, Mass. Photos by Chris Green.

CREATE CUSTOM MOLDINGS WITH A ROUTER

If you can't find the molding you want at your local home center or lumberyard, consider making your own. You can create complex moldings by assembling simple profiles milled with a handheld router or router table. The three router bits below are available from Lee Valley (800-871-8158; www.leevalley.com).



Although designed to make base-cap molding, the bit pictured at right is similar to the one used to create the band molding for the pine sample on the facing page.



Molding bit No. 5

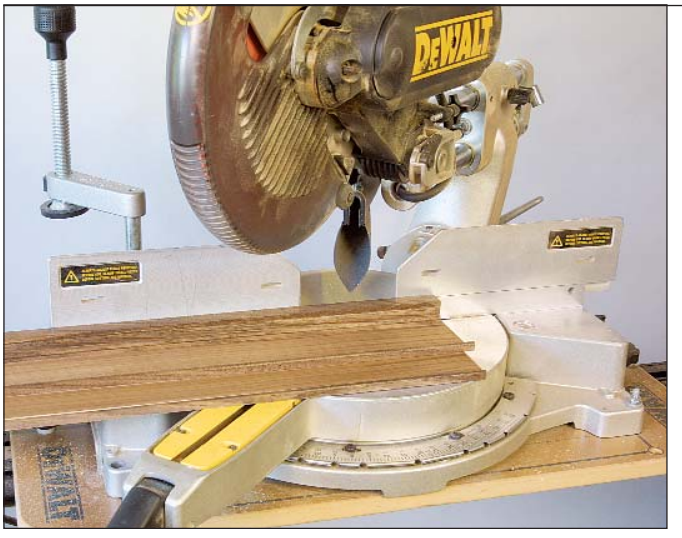
The two bits pictured at right were used in the more ornate cherry casing on p. 82.



⅛-in. radius edge-beading bit

French provincial classic No. 1

ASSEMBLE THE TRIM FIRST, THEN CUT IT ONCE



Rather than running six individual pieces of trim around a door or window, you can glue, align, and clamp them to create a composite molding, which you then can miter as a single piece. To avoid dangerous shrapnel and to protect the sawblade, be careful not to cut through any nails.