

The most expensive paint may not be the best choice

By Elisabeth Leamy
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Choosing paint colors is hard enough, but these days consumers have to decide among dozens of paint brands, plus different quality levels within those brands. And then there's price. Will paying \$100 a gallon get you a better paint than if you pay \$30 a gallon? It's almost as maddening as choosing between Paper White and Whisper White.

The nonprofit magazine Consumer Reports tests paints, grading them on the traits consumers say are most important. Exterior paint is judged on its appearance after tests that simulate multiple years. Interior paint is evaluated for factors including its ability to withstand scrubbing, resist mildew, and cover old colors in a single coat.

In the most recent rounds of testing, a remarkable four out of the top five interior and exterior paints were hardware-store brands. So right away we know you don't have to buy a premium brand to get great paint. Still, the cheapest paints, costing \$17 to \$27 a gallon, didn't make it into the top five.

"Generally, spending more money does not always equate to a better paint," said Rico De Paz, paint-testing program leader at Consumer Reports. "But it's probably a good idea to stay away from the most inexpensive brands at most retailers without checking our ratings first."

Here are Consumer Reports' top five interior paints out of 21 tested. (Prices were obtained online and may vary slightly. Sherwin-Williams bought Valspar in June, so names and formulas may change.)

1. Behr Marquee (\$39 a gallon at Home Depot)
2. Behr Premium Plus Enamel (\$27 a gallon at Home Depot)
3. Valspar Reserve (\$44 a gallon at Lowe's)
4. Behr Premium Plus Ultra (\$30-\$37 a gallon at Home De-

pot)

5. Benjamin Moore Aura (\$70 a gallon at independent dealers)

Here are the top five exterior paints of 23 tested.

1. Behr Premium Plus Ultra Exterior (\$38 a gallon at Home Depot)
2. Clark + Kensington Exterior (\$37 a gallon at Ace Hardware stores)
3. Sherwin-Williams Emerald Exterior (\$80-\$84 a gallon at Sherwin-Williams stores)
4. Behr Premium Plus Exterior (\$30 a gallon at Home Depot)
5. Valspar Duramax Exterior (\$40 a gallon at Lowe's)

To choose among the top-rated paints, you could go for the lowest price. After all, Behr's Premium Plus Enamel scores almost as high as its Marquee interior paint, but it costs \$12 less a gallon. But as home-improvement projects go, painting is one of the cheapest. A gallon of paint will cover up to 400 square feet. You can take price into account, but maybe it shouldn't be at the very top of your decision tree.

So what is the most important factor? "Consumers should start with the best-performing paints, but then look among those to select the paint that has the best performance for the attributes of their particular project," De Paz said.

For example, if you're painting over a dark wall, you'll want a paint that covers well. If you're painting a dank basement bathroom, mildew resistance could be your top priority. And if you worry about chemicals, you'll look for a paint with low or no volatile organic compounds. (Low-VOC paints used to lack durability, but Consumer Reports says many now perform well.)

But you shouldn't choose a paint brand based on color. "It's possible to match pretty much any color these days to the point where the human eye can't detect the difference," De

Paz said. Perhaps no paint company is more famous for its colors than upscale British company Farrow & Ball. But that paint costs about \$100 a gallon, and Consumer Reports rated it "very good," not "excellent," like the top five above. So the magazine did an experiment, asking hardware-store clerks to match a Farrow & Ball color by mixing their own paints. They nailed it within 1 percent.

Another option is to use an online color-matching tool to find an equivalent color by a different company, rather than buying custom-mixed paint. I tried the tool at color-swatches.com. Under "Our Services," I chose the search feature and typed in Norway Spruce by Benjamin Moore. Once that color came up, there was an option to convert to another brand. I asked for a Behr match and the website recommended Behr's Scotland Road, and the two swatches looked remarkably similar. Just be aware that the sheen of different companies' paint can vary, which could make the color look different. This is why a test patch on your own wall is key.

Once you've chosen a great paint, you need a great plan. Here are Consumer Reports' suggestions for making your project as efficient as possible.

Covering: If you are painting over a very dark color, choose a paint rated excellent for "hiding," and it should cover it in one coat. All top five interior paints listed above are rated "excellent" for covering.

Priming: Modern paints that claim to be self-priming really do work, so you can skip using a separate primer.

Calculating costs: Paint manufacturers and retailers offer online calculators to help you determine how much paint you need and avoid overbuying. (Be sure to check whether the calculation is based on one coat or two.)

Bulk buying: If a calculator shows you need more than five gallons, price your paint in five-