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Salvaged building materials offer advantages, but should be used with caution



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By Day Marketing

Recycling has been around long enough that it has become a common practice for most people. By separating out cans, bottles, papers, and other reusable materials, you help put them to new use while reducing the amount of material going into landfills.

The practice has also caught on in the home construction business. Many different types of building materials can be reused in another home after being removed from a residence that is being remodeled or demolished. Some homeowners will specifically seek out reclaimed building materials due to their aesthetic appeal.

Using salvaged building materials in the construction or renovation of a home offers a number of benefits. Yet homeowners should also be aware that there are certain limitations when taking this approach.

Salvaged options are available for just about every kind of building material or home feature. The Environmental Protection Agency says materials taken from demolition jobs are sometimes **repurposed in a different way**, such as chipping scrap wood to be used as mulch. However, intact materials that can be easily removed are good candidates for reuse in another building.

Reclaimed wood is a particularly popular option. Eileen Colkin Cuneo, writing for This Old House, says it is possible to salvage **old-growth wood** and other lumber that is no longer commercially available due to environmental regulations. This older wood is prized because it typically has a richer appearance and can be very durable.

Steel and bricks are also popular choices for recycled building materials. Heritage Insurance, a company based in Tampa, Fla., says **recycled scrap steel** is often used as a stronger replacement for wooden beams. Unlike wood, bricks and concrete blocks are not vulnerable to factors such as rot or termite infestation; as such, they can often be salvaged intact and used again.

Pipes, siding, insulation, doors, windows, bathtubs, sinks, and appliances are other examples of home features that can be salvaged from a demolition and put to new use. The Northeast Recycling Council says it's also possible to **salvage unique architectural features** such as crown molding, bannisters, and columns.

If you plan to use salvaged building materials in a home project, you should have an idea of what the construction will entail and where there are opportunities for reusing materials. Make sure you have exact measurements for any cabinets, windows, or other features you plan to install; you don't want to purchase a salvaged item only to find that it won't fit in your home.

Salvaged materials are available through a variety of venues. Perry Miller, writing for the sustainability site Inhabit, says the **Habitat for Humanity Restore** is a popular resource as it offers everything from used furniture to recycled building materials. Older appliances and fixtures can be found in pawn stores or "scratch and dent" stores, along with online resources such as Freecycle. You might even be able to directly approach a construction company to ask about recovering items from a teardown site, although some builders may be reluctant to agree due to safety or liability issues.

Using salvaged building materials instead of new ones can benefit the environment in a number of ways. The EPA says the practice helps conserve forests and other natural resources while also reducing the amount of waste sent to landfills. Salvage also means there will be less energy used to extract and transport new building materials.

In many cases, these benefits translate to savings for the homeowner. Nick Gromicko, writing for the International Association of Certified Home Inspectors, says that since the building materials **don't need to be produced or shipped a long distance**, they can be purchased at a significantly lower price than new products. However, salvaged materials can sometimes result in a greater expense than new materials. Antique or high-quality fixtures may be considered more valuable than their newer counterparts.

Reclaimed wood will need to be properly treated before it can be used in another project. Cuneo says planks must be cleaned, stripped of any nails or other fasteners, planed, and kiln-dried to prevent warping. The intensive process might result in a higher price tag than new lumber.

Some things should not be reused due to safety concerns. The Northeast Recycling Council says older plumbing may contain lead which can leach into your water, while older appliances may not meet current safety standards. Gromicko says you'll also want to make sure any materials, particularly wood, are free of lead-based paint.

Many home features have been updated to be much more energy-efficient, so reusing older materials may run up your utility bills. For example, older toilets often used five gallons of water on a single flush, compared to newer ones that use 1.6 gallons or less per flush. Older windows can also be much less efficient, leading to costly heat loss during the winter.

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