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Home improvement

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Doors: Material matters

When it comes to security and weather-resistance, our tests show that a \$135 steel front door can be the equal of one in fiberglass or solid wood costing up to five times as much. But that doesn't mean the steel door is a better bet in the long run.

After subjecting many different doors to dents and scratches, plus the laboratory equivalent of torrential rain, strong winds, and the equivalent of a decade's use, we found that steel doors show the effects of wear and tear more than wood or fiberglass doors do. That's an important point to keep in mind if, like millions of other homeowners, you're ready to replace the front door to enhance your home's curb appeal.

The doors we're discussing here are known in the trade as entry doors. They can be back doors or side doors, too, not just front doors. (They're also known as door systems because they come pre-hung in a frame and often drilled for a knob and lock.) But because the main entrance commands the most attention from the street, it also commands the most attention in the marketplace.

As such, it's becoming easier to customize a door; manufacturers offer dozens of options for panel and glass designs, grille patterns, sidelights, and transoms. Homeowners are taking advantage of that, adding glass panels or sidelights or upgrading from steel to fiberglass or wood. Masonite, Peachtree, Pella, and other major manufacturers offer a range of doors in wood, steel, or fiberglass.

HOW TO CHOOSE

Most doors perform very well, we found, so appearance and price will often be the deciding factor. But in selecting a door, you also need to keep some practical considerations in mind.

Consider fiberglass first. Steel doors account for about half the market, competing with fiberglass and wood. [Types](#) shows how they compare. Considering price, wear and tear, and maintenance, fiberglass makes a very practical choice for most people. As a class, fiberglass doors edge out steel doors for wear and tear. Wood doors were better still in that regard, we found. However, wood doors generally didn't do quite as well as fiberglass or steel at keeping out heavy rain. They also require regular maintenance to keep their looks.

With any type of door, be sure it has an adjustable threshold to keep it weathertight over the years. Without that feature, you may need to add a new sweep to be sure that the door keeps out rain and drafts.

Know the pros and cons of glass. Entry doors like the ones we tested are available in hundreds of variations, depending on which panel design, glass inserts, sidelights, or transoms you choose. The more elaborate the glass, the more the door will cost.

Keep in mind, too, that glass near the knob and lock can compromise security. Glass inserts also cut the insulating value of steel or fiberglass doors.

Keep energy efficiency in perspective. Steel and fiberglass doors have more insulating value than wood doors, but the differences really don't matter much. For one thing, doors are a very small part of the surface area of a house and therefore don't allow large amounts of warm to air escape. For another, heat is generally lost through air leaks around the door, not through the door itself.

We think it's better to use price or style, not claims for energy efficiency, to choose between doors you're considering.

Remember that size matters. Unless you're replacing an entry door as part of a larger remodeling

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GRAND ENTRANCE Like all the doors tested, this model comes with dozens of options for glass, transoms, and sidelights.

Photos courtesy of Thermo-Tru, Reliabil, Simpson

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