

A L L  
A B O U T

# Wainscoting

Dress up your plain-Jane walls with stylish trim that also guards against scuffs and scratches. This Old House helps you get the look you want at a price you can afford **By Josh Garskof**

**A house with good bones has pleasing lines** on the outside, but that artful composition has to be echoed on the inside, too. And nothing's better for giving rooms a handsome, well-built look than wainscoting on the walls.

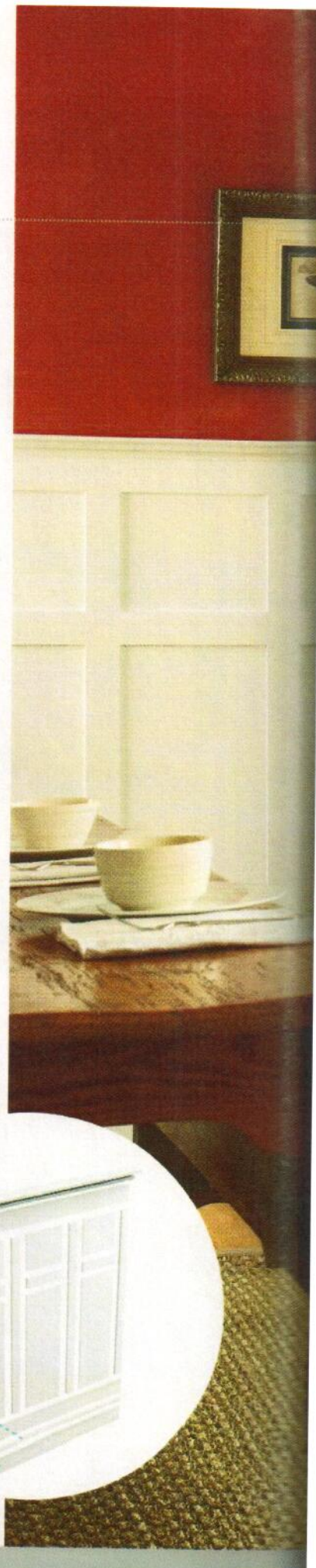
A combination of decorative boards or panels and moldings that extend partway up a wall's face, wainscoting is a centuries-old marriage of form and style. Dating to the 1300s, the Dutch used it to shield the bottom half of plaster walls from such hazards as jostled chairs, spurs on riding boots, perhaps even carelessly swung scabbards. Wainscoting still guards our walls, but today it's from dirt-caked gardening shoes in mudrooms, olive-oil fingerprints in kitchens, and the inevitable scuffs in the close quarters along hallways and stairways.

Covering your walls with wainscoting made from stock boards—or "sticks"—and panels is easy to do yourself, if you know your way around a chop saw. And if you don't, there's wainscoting that arrives on your doorstep fully assembled and ready to install. On the following pages, we show these and other products and some basic design options, plus a how-to plan for creating a pleasing layout. Just the kind of knowledge you'll need to boost the architectural integrity of any bare walls in your house.

## What's in a name?

Beyond the beadboard or paneling at its center, wainscoting is the sum of many parts. It typically stands on sturdy base molding, and it's always crowned partway up the wall with a cap rail.

Shown here (inset) are the moldings that combine to create the flat panel wainscoting pictured at right.







## VITALS

### How do you say it?

*Wayne's coating?*  
*Wayne's cotting?*  
*Wayne's kitting?*  
Merriam-Webster prefers the first pronunciation, but all are acceptable. It's also fine to call it *wainscot*; the terms are interchangeable.

### Is it right for you?

Available in a variety of patterns and panel options to suit almost any decor, it's often used to stylishly safeguard walls that tend to take a beating, such as those in kitchens, foyers, and baths.

### What's it made of?

Traditionally, solid wood, but these days wainscoting is also milled from plywood, plastic, and medium-density fiberboard (MDF).

### What's it cost?

Starts at \$1 per square foot for beadboard wainscoting that you assemble yourself and goes up to \$31 per square foot for custom-crafted hardwood panels.



### How much care?

Top it with semigloss paint or clear polyurethane finish and you can wipe stray marks with a sponge and soapy water.



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## Where to use it

Elegant armor for your walls, wainscoting is particularly well suited to rooms that take a lot of wear and tear

**1 Entries** In mudrooms, where boots, backpacks, and wet umbrellas can damage walls, beadboard makes a good choice because there are fewer prominent edges to dent and ding. The walls in more formal foyers are often clad in paneled wainscoting.

**2 Stairs and hallways** The walls of these narrow passages benefit from wainscoting's scuff and mark protection. The horizontal rails and the cap generally follow the pitch of the stair; the stiles or beadboard remain vertical.

**3 Eating areas** In dining rooms, tall wainscoting topped with a grooved plate rail displays fine china and serving pieces. For more casual kitchens, wainscoting capped at chair height with a prominent top rail safeguards walls from being marred when diners push back from the table.

**4 Family rooms and dens** Adding wainscoting to areas where kids—and pets—congregate can have a calming effect, the architectural equivalent of a *shhh*. Rec rooms benefit too, with a cap rail that's wide enough to perch a drink, Ping-Pong paddles, or pool-cue chalk.

**5 Baths** A traditional alternative to pricey tiled walls, wainscoting made from warp-resistant wood, specially treated MDF, or solid surfacing helps protect the drywall or plaster underneath from water damage. It also has a warming effect in this room, where cold porcelain fixtures, ceramic floors, and tub enclosures can predominate.

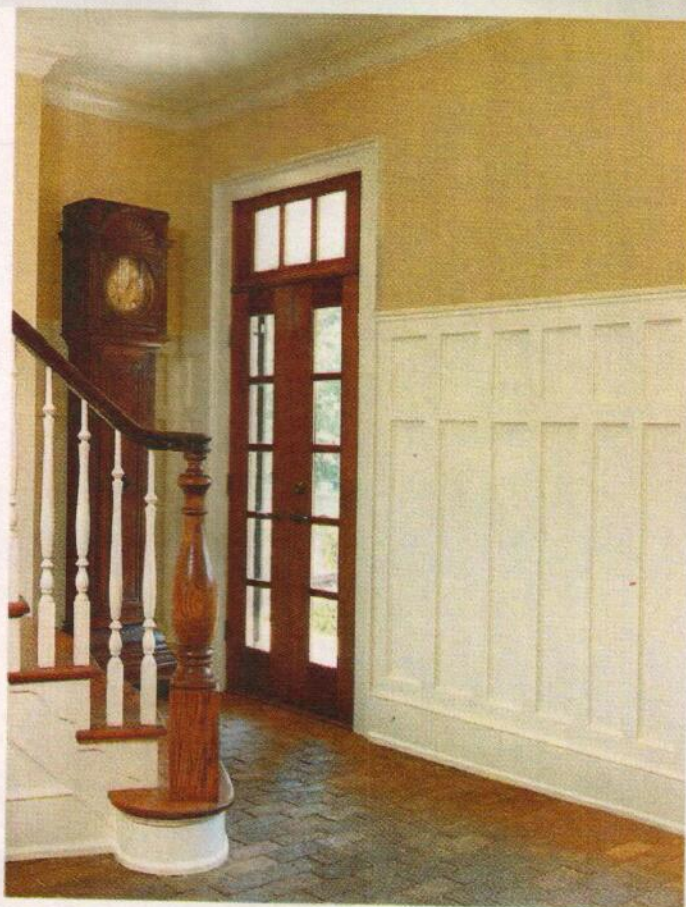
**6 Kids' rooms** Children probably won't give two hoots about it, but parents will appreciate the way wainscoting looks and how easily it cleans up after being used as a canvas for finger paints and crayons.



### pro advice

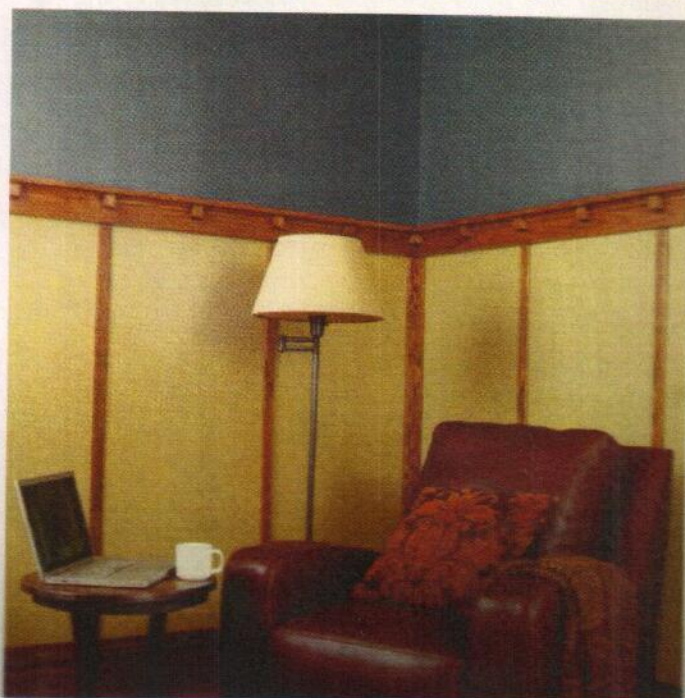
LYNN HOPKINS, ARCHITECT, LEXINGTON, MASS.

"Use paneled wainscot in rooms and entryways where you can stand back and appreciate it. Beadboard works better in close quarters—hallways, mudrooms, and utility areas."

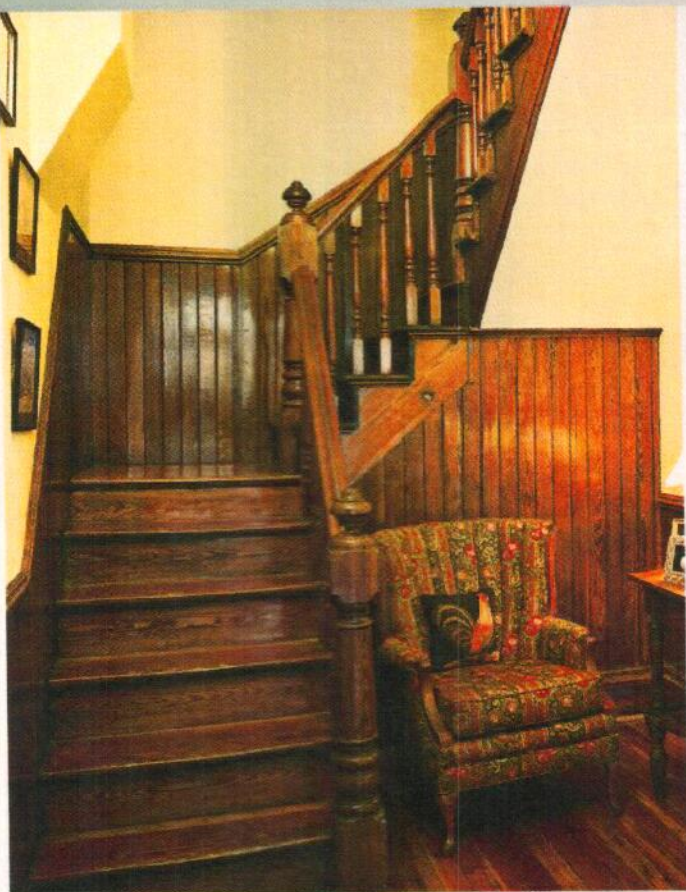


**Entry** Two-tier wainscoting mirrors the look of the French doors topped with a divided-light transom. Double-panel wainscoting, similar to shown, \$8.75 per sq. ft., Wainscot Solutions; wainscotsolutions.com

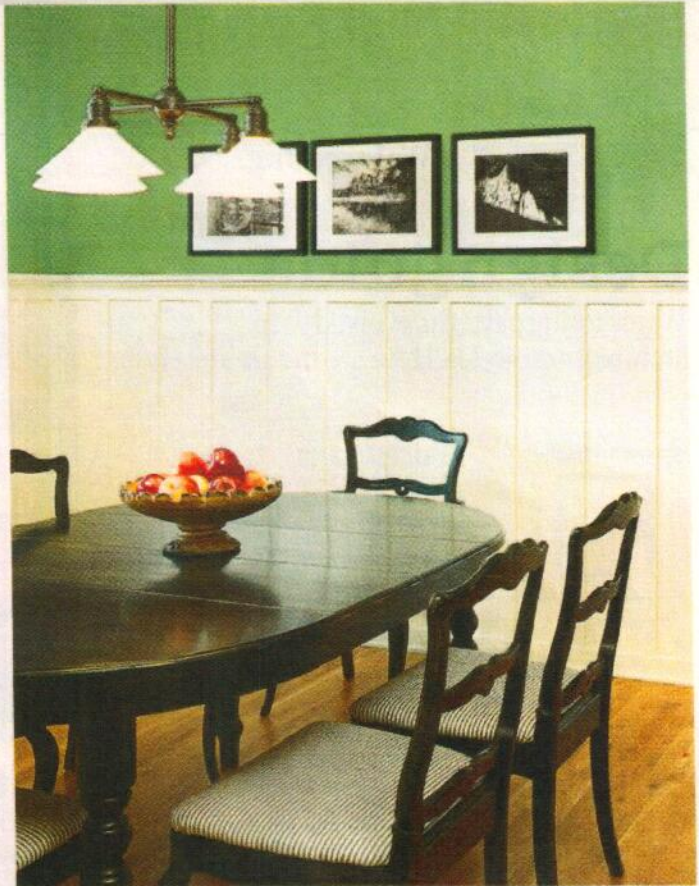
**Den** Beige paint on the flat panels and a clear finish on the oak rails, stiles, and cap offer a warm contrast to the cool blue walls. Solid oak over plywood panels, similar to shown, \$2.15 per sq. ft., Dykes Lumber; dykeslumber.com







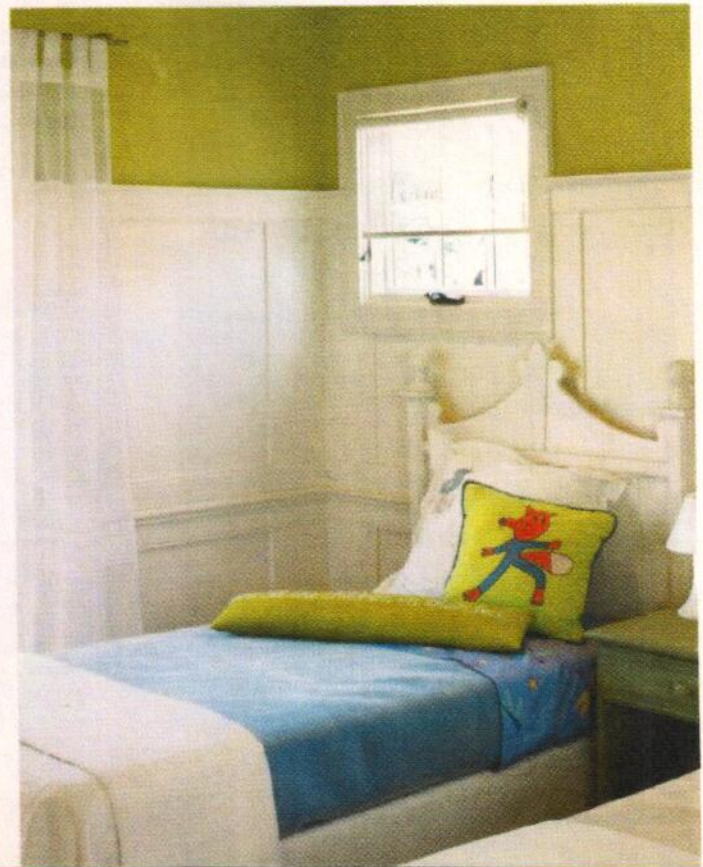
**Stairway** This richly stained antique pine beadboard glows under a durable top coat of polyurethane. Reclaimed heart-pine beadboard, similar to shown, starting at \$6.60 per sq. ft., Goodwin Heart Pine; heartpine.com



**Dining room** Crisp white paint on this board-and-batten wainscoting provides a bright contrast to the teal walls. Shaker-style flat panels, similar to shown, \$6.25 per sq. ft., Elite Trim Works; elitetrimworks.com

**Bathroom** White-painted beadboard ties together the trim and acts as a backsplash for the pedestal sink. Moisture-resistant MDF with 2-inch bead, similar to shown, \$2.35 per sq. ft., Nantucket Beadboard; beadboard.com

**Kid's room** This stacked design has an intermediate chair rail to prevent headboards from bumping into the wall. Double-height flat-panel wainscoting, similar to shown: \$10 per sq. ft., Castlewood; wainscotingamerica.com

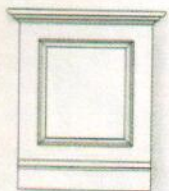




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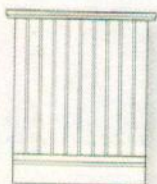
## Design guide

Wainscoting patterns evolved with architectural styles. Here are the greatest hits



### raised panel

Typically built like a door, with thick beveled-edged panels held in place by a frame. Each panel expands and contracts freely to prevent cracking. Great for formal spaces, especially in houses with Colonial design influences.



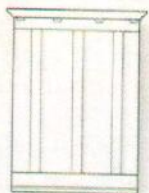
### beadboard

Thin tongue-and-groove strips, popular in Queen Anne-style homes from the late 1800s, dress up informal spaces, such as bathrooms, stairways, and kitchens. Gets its name from the round bead along its edge that disguises the joint between strips.



### flat panel

The Shakers favored this simple, clean look, which also works in contemporary homes. Originally, the panels were solid wood cradled in a stile-and-rail frame. These days, it's more common to lay the frame over a flat sheet of plywood or fiberboard.



### board and batten

Wide planks laid vertically on the wall alternate with narrow strips that cover the joints. Often seen in Arts and Crafts bungalows, this type of wainscoting usually runs high up the wall and is finished with a cap rail wide enough to display plates or pottery.



### hybrid

The playful addition of diagonal beadboard to a standard paneled wainscoting frame can be seen in the exuberant Eastlake-style houses of the late 1800s. Today, the same could be done with fabric, wallpaper, or metal ceiling tiles.



## Material matters

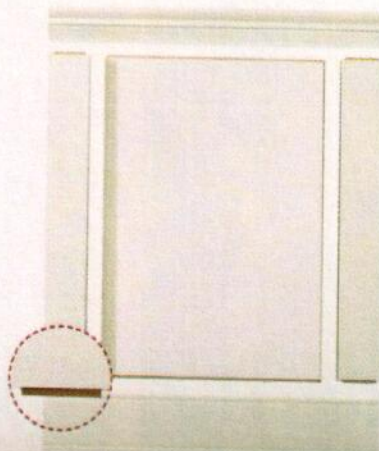
Wainscoting's looks, how it holds up, and its cost depend on what it's made of.

**Solid wood** The original wainscoting material. Paint lesser species, such as pine, or clear-coat the good stuff, such as walnut and cherry, to highlight its color and grain. Wood requires careful installation and finishing to prevent cracks and gaps caused by seasonal expansion and contraction. \$-\$\$\$

**MDF** Medium-density fiberboard cuts like wood but doesn't expand, contract, warp, split, or have knots. Comes either primed for paint or veneered. Keep it away from water, which causes it to swell and break down. Specially treated moisture-resistant MDF, however, can stand up to steam in a bath. \$\$

**Plastic** Made from either cellular PVC or the same solid surfacing material used for kitchen counters. Looks like painted wood but won't rot, making it ideal for baths, laundry rooms, and even a kitchen backsplash. \$\$

**Plywood** The long, wide sheets make installation fast—just rip it down, glue it to the wall, and finish with cap and base moldings. Unlike those in other materials, the groove profiles tend to be shallow and rough. \$



## WAINSCOT IN A BOX

For about half the cost of custom wainscoting, order a ready-to-assemble kit, complete with center panels, stiles, rails, and cap and base moldings. Milled with tongues and grooves (see inset), components fit together like a puzzle. Choose from a handful of panel sizes and designs, in preprimed or veneered MDF. You supply your wall dimensions and the pieces arrive in a few weeks.

MDF flat-panel kit > \$11.50 per sq. ft. New England Classic, [newenglandclassic.com](http://newenglandclassic.com)



## sticks

Boards fit together like tongue-and-groove flooring (see inset), typically with a decorative bead detail on one face and a V-groove on the other. Pieces made of quartersawn wood, with grain running parallel to the edges, are more stable than flat-sawn ones.



**A. Single-bead birch** > 1/2" thick x 2 1/2" wide x 36" high, \$8.60 per sq. ft., Vintage Woodworks; [vintagewoodworks.com](http://vintagewoodworks.com)

**B. Double-bead cherry** > 1/2" thick x 5" wide x 36" high, \$9.10 per sq. ft., Baird Brothers; [bairdbrothers.com](http://bairdbrothers.com)

**C. Double-bead reclaimed redwood** > 1/2" thick x 4 1/4" wide x 36" high, \$4.55 per sq. ft., Pacific Heritage Wood Supply Co.; [phwood.com](http://phwood.com)

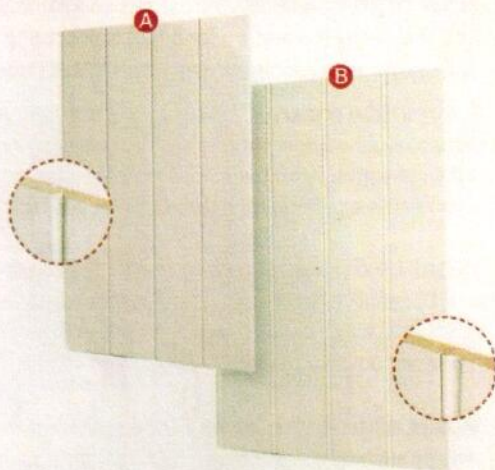
## How to get it

You don't need a pro to build wainscoting from scratch.

Choose thrifty, assemble-yourself sticks or planks, or take it easy with ready-made sheets or panels

## planks

These wide boards look like high-end painted wood "sticks," but they're actually primed MDF milled with exceptionally crisp profiles, such as V-groove and bead and cove (see insets). For humid bathrooms, use an MDF made to resist dampness.



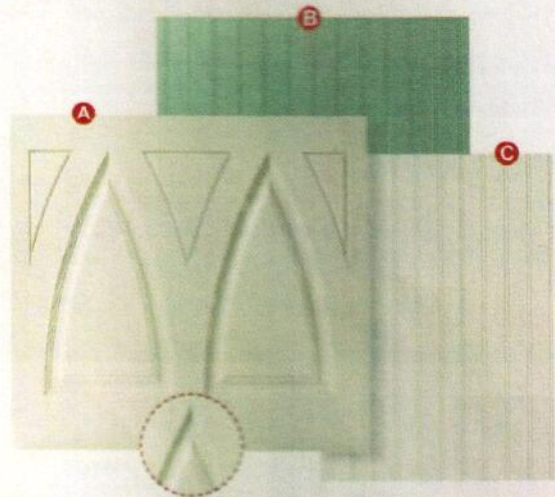
**A. V-groove MDF** > 1/2" thick x 11" wide x 36" high,

\$3.80 per sq. ft., Nantucket Beadboard; [beadboard.com](http://beadboard.com)

**B. Bead-and-cove MDF** > 1/2" thick x 12" wide x 36" high, \$4.95 per sq. ft., Nantucket Beadboard; [beadboard.com](http://beadboard.com)

## sheets

Long pieces of plywood, solid surfacing, or MDF cover walls quickly, with few or no gaps. Designs routed into thick sheets of MDF (see inset) are deep and convincing; thinner sheets yield shallower and less realistic details.



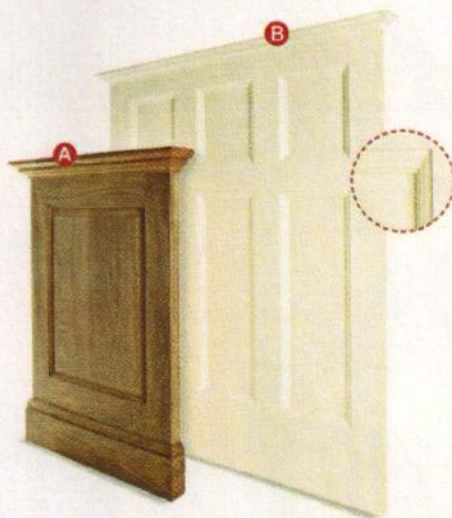
**A. Raised-panel MDF** > 1/4" thick x 36" high x 12" long, \$16.75 per sq. ft. with cap. IntriG; [intrig.net](http://intrig.net)

**B. Beadboard solid surfacing** > 1/4" thick x 36" high x 8' long, starting at \$39 per sq. ft., Swan Corp.; [swanstone.com](http://swanstone.com)

**C. Beadboard MDF** > 1/4" thick x 48" high x 8' long, starting at 65 cents per sq. ft., States Industries; [statesind.com](http://statesind.com)

## panels

A millwork company custom-designs and makes each component to fit your room. The wainscoting is then shipped in pieces or fully assembled with perfect joints (see inset), ready to attach to your walls. You simply add the supplied trim.



**A. Black walnut raised panel** > 1 1/2" thick x 36" high, fully assembled, \$30.75 per sq. ft., Baird Brothers; [bairdbrothers.com](http://bairdbrothers.com)

**B. Flat-panel MDF** > 1" thick x 49" high, fully assembled, \$11.25 per sq. ft., Wainscot Solutions; [wainscotsolutions.com](http://wainscotsolutions.com)



## Design rules of thumb

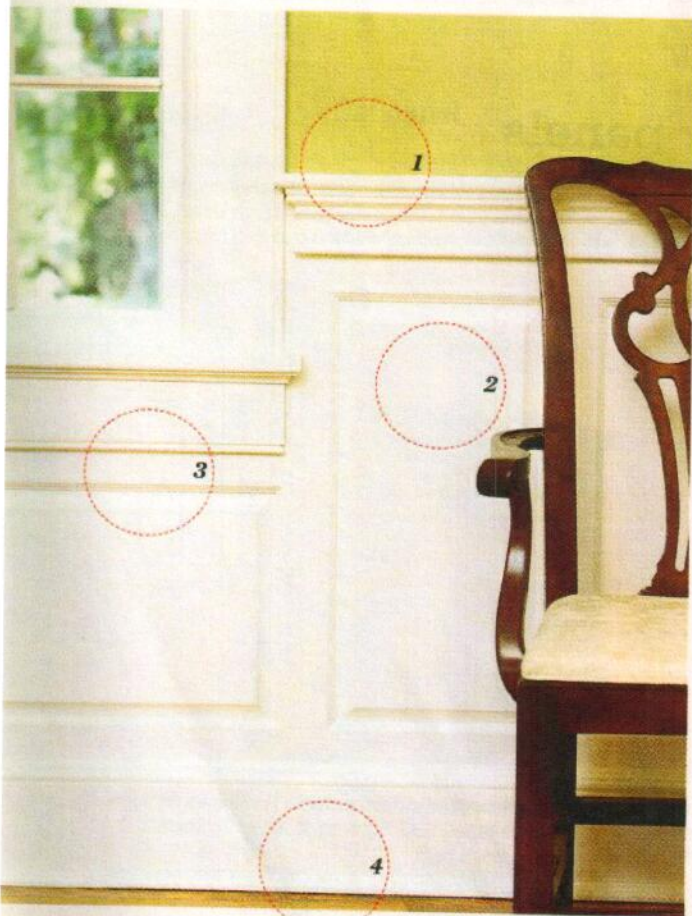
Follow these guidelines for pleasing proportions

- 1 How high?** Generally, the cap sits about one-third the way up the wall. So if the ceiling is 9 feet, go for 3-foot wainscoting. For taller wainscoting, such as one with a plate rail, cap it two-thirds the way up the wall.
- 2 How wide a panel?** They should all be the same, so avoid cutting individual panels down at corners and doorways to get them to fit walls of varying lengths. Architects and kit makers use computer-aided design software to calculate panel widths that work for your specific room dimensions.
- 3 What to do under windows?** For beadboard, simply cut it to size. For paneled wainscoting, order a center panel that's the same width as your cased window. Its height will vary depending on the distance between your window's projecting bottom stool and the floor or baseboard top.
- 4 What about the base?** Baseboard topped with a profiled cap visually anchors wainscoting in a room and adds a little extra kick protection. Cover the joint where wainscoting meets the floor with shoe molding.



## WAINSCOT OUTSIDE

Beadboard made of cellular PVC looks, installs, and paints just like wood or MDF. But unlike its fibrous competitors, it won't swell, rot, or attract mold or termites in wet areas. So go ahead and panel your porch in plastic; no one will be the wiser. The walls of the porch above are clad in 5-inch-wide tongue-and-groove beadboard sticks, \$4 per sq. ft., Azek Building Products; azek.com.



## Four ways to save

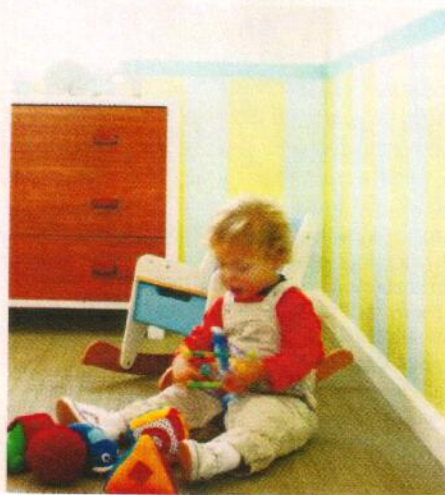
Get the look of wainscoting without the pricey panels

**Painted on planks** Roll vertical stripes in alternating hues over the lower third of your wall for a cheery two-tone plank effect, such as the one shown below. A horizontal painted band mimics a cap rail.

**Wall frames** Install a chair rail and glue and nail frames made from decorative panel moldings beneath it. Paint the chair rail and everything below the same color for the look of raised-panel wainscoting.

**Faux flat panel** Glue and nail rails, stiles, and cap molding directly to smooth drywall or plaster to mimic flat panel wainscoting. Paint the boards the same color as the wall, or finish the wood in an accent color to match the rest of the trim in the room.

**Stain-grade wall veneer** Affix hardwood plywood directly to the wall. Then nail on your stiles and rails, and top the plywood with cap molding. For the look of a solid-wood assembly, cut the plywood so that its grain runs vertically on the wall.





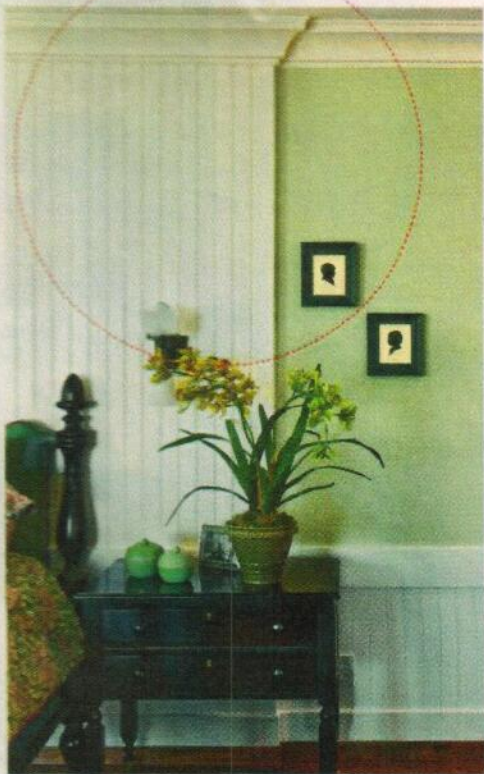
### vary the height

Low wainscoting takes a sharp turn toward the ceiling for a dramatic bedroom backdrop. Beadboard sheet, similar to shown, \$2 per sq. ft., Nantucket Beadboard; beadboard.com



### build in seating

Beadboard doubles as the back and sides of a window seat. Sheet, similar to shown, Astoria beadboard, \$1.10 per sq. ft., Trimac Panel; trimacpanel.com

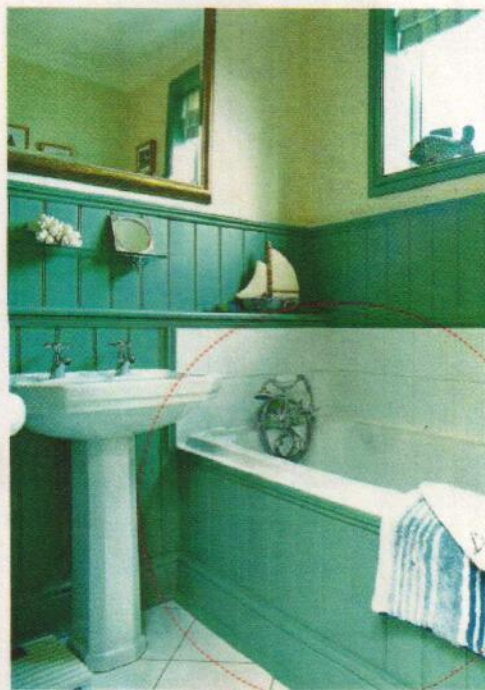


## Ideas we love

Clever ways to use wainscoting on more than walls in bedrooms, baths, hallways, and kitchens

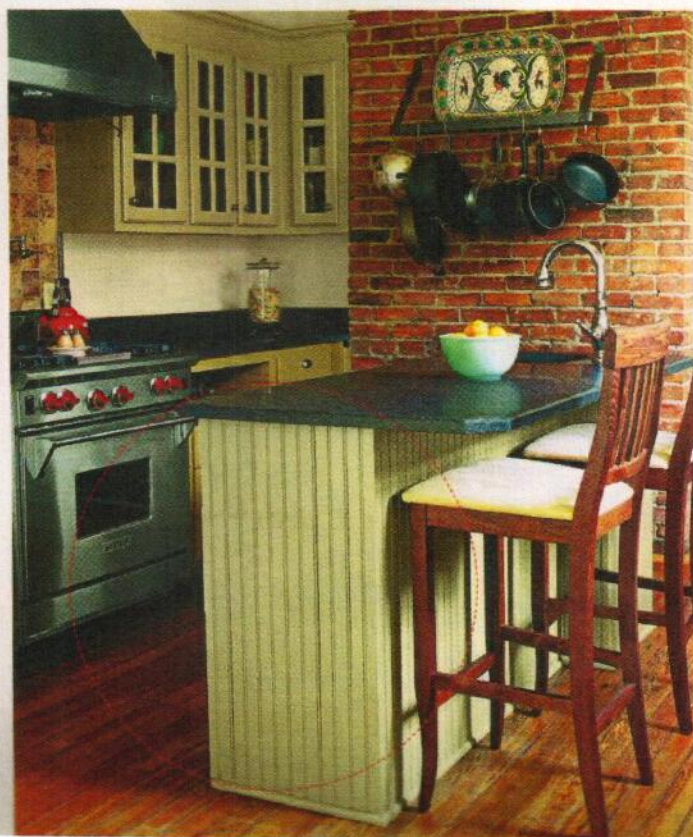
### finish a tub

Paintable cellular PVC beadboard shrugs off water, making it a smart choice for a tub surround. 5-inch sticks, similar to shown, \$15.10 per sq. ft., Fypon beadboard; fypon.com



### wrap a bar

Beadboard covers the backs of stock cabinets for a custom-look breakfast bar. 4-inch sticks, similar to shown, starting at \$3 per sq. ft., WindsorOne; windsorone.com



### DIY online

Learn how to install both paneled and beadboard wainscoting at [thisoldhouse.com/bonus](http://thisoldhouse.com/bonus)