



**GPS**  
for less

Road test: Hatchbacks



Great  
**GRILLS**

**PAINTS &  
STAINS**

# Consumer Reports®

America's best  
drugstores

- CVS vs. Wal-Mart vs. Costco & more
- Get the lowest prices

JUNE 2008

EXPERT • INDEPENDENT • NONPROFIT®

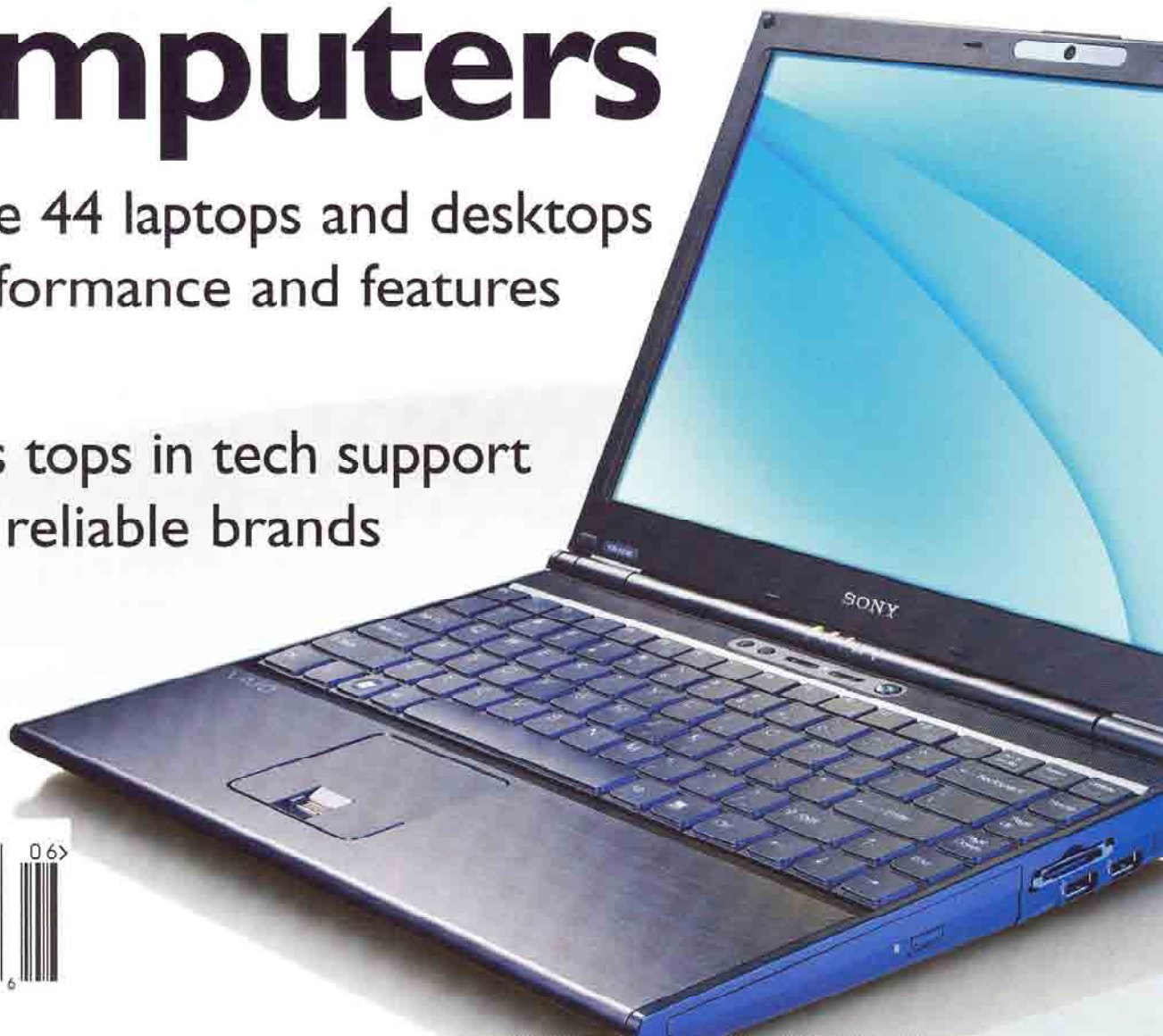
[www.ConsumerReports.org](http://www.ConsumerReports.org)

## Best & worst computers

We rate 44 laptops and desktops for performance and features

### PLUS

- Who's tops in tech support
- Most reliable brands



# PAINTS & STAINS

## Scrimping doesn't pay

You could spend several dollars more per gallon for exterior paint and stain this year, thanks in part to the pricier petroleum that goes into them. That might tempt you to pick a lesser-grade coating. But our tests show that penny-pinching could cost you more money over time.

Manufacturers reformulate their products often, typically to meet rules limiting volatile organic compounds. But they admit it's a challenge to reduce those pollutants without compromising performance. Indeed, our latest fully tested paints did not fend off dirt and other weathering effects for as long as some past products.

Because reformulated finishes might not wear the same as earlier versions, we remove all such previously tested products from our Ratings. That's why you won't see a few familiar brands, including some of last year's top-scorers. But you will find several new picks from Valspar and other brands with durability and value. And because we test paint bases to which tints are added, rather than a handful of factory-mixed colors, our findings should hold for a variety of colors.

Our latest Ratings of more than 40 paints and stains include results for major brands after a year or two of accelerated outdoor testing, equal to about three to six years on a house. But as the scores show, some initially promising finishes look far less impressive after the equivalent of roughly nine years, when they're fully tested. (See CloseUp on page 40.)

The Ratings also show that some stains needed to be reapplied after the equivalent of only three years, and some



**HIGH SCORER** The flat-finish California 2010 paint, while on the pricey side at \$38 a gallon, looked best overall after years of exposure.

lesser-known paints looked better than some heavy hitters. Here are the details:

**Smaller brands take the top.** California brand paints have long been top performers, and the 2010 line is no exception. The regional brand's Fresh Coat Velvet flat finish, previously our top pick, is also doing well in our retest after the equivalent of roughly three years in the elements. Kelly-Moore, another regional brand, joins California's 2010 at the top of this year's Ratings of fully tested paints with its Acry-Shield flat.

**The dirt on some big brands.** Some versions of Kilz, sold at Wal-Mart, had trouble keeping clean after the equivalent of six years, while several from Acc, Behr (a Home Depot brand), and Benjamin Moore needed cleaning after the equivalent of only three years. Of the two Valspar (Lowe's) Ultra Premium Duramax paints still being tested, the flat is doing better

so far at keeping its original color.

**Opaque stains are clearly better.** Opaque stains save time and money in the long run because they outlast semitransparent stains as a group. Pluses for semitransparent stains include visible wood grain and less prep work, because those stains penetrate the wood rather than form a top film like opaque stains. But even the best opaque stain won't last as long as most paints, all of which resisted cracking in our rigorous outdoor testing.

### HOW TO CHOOSE

We test only premium lines from major brands, which tend to perform best over time. But as our latest Ratings reveal, some of the best-performing paints and stains cost far less than lower-scoring lines. Here's what else to remember before you put on your overalls or hire a professional painter:

**Match the paint to your locale.** Look for mildew resistance if you live in a cool, moist, or shady climate. Dirt resistance is more critical in urban and industrial areas, and resistance to color change is important in sunny locations and climates. You'll also probably prefer a color that works well with your home's architecture, including the roof. While Victorian houses can support a vibrant palette, creams, tans, and other neutral hues are safer for most homes, especially if you're planning to sell. And remember that you might need approval from your review board if you live in a historic district and want to get creative.

**Know what your pro is using.** Your painter's top choice might not be a top pick in our tests. Make sure the written

contract clearly states the brand, line, and cost of the paint or stain used. It should also state how many coats of paint will be applied. We're currently testing self-priming paints, including Behr's Premium Plus Ultra line. Until those tests shake out, we recommend insisting on the best job: one coat of primer and two coats of paint.

**Look for hidden savings.** Refinishing a 2,000-square-foot house will require roughly 10 gallons of stain and up to 20 gallons of paint. You can often cut paint costs by 50 percent or more by buying two five-gallon containers instead of 10 one-gallon cans. But resist the urge to choose a lower-grade paint to get the larger con-

tainer. Also be sure to ask retailers you can get a volume discount buying the paint yourself. The Quality Institute, supported by Ron Hass, which supplies raw material for most paints, offers a paint-quantity calculator free of cost on its Web site. [paintquality.com/diy/calculator/ca](http://paintquality.com/diy/calculator/ca)

## doingitright

### 7 SECRETS TO A LASTING FINISH

Even the toughest exterior paint or stain will probably fail before its time if it's brushed onto a dirty, poorly prepped surface or gets rained on before it's dry. Whether you hire a pro or are among the roughly 20 percent of homeowners who do it themselves, these tips from our experts will help ensure that the finished result looks better longer while safeguarding you from health hazards:



#### 1 Inspect for lead.

This is where to begin if your home is painted and was built before 1978, when lead paint was pulled off the market. The federal Environmental Protection Agency recommends having the surface checked for lead and hiring a pro to do the prep work. While children are especially vulnerable, anyone who comes in contact with lead is at risk. (See "Getting the Lead Out" at [www.ConsumerReports.org/leadpaint](http://www.ConsumerReports.org/leadpaint).)

#### 2 Invest in proper prep work.

Presuming there's no lead, make sure all loose or peeling paint is sanded or scraped off the surface. Thoroughly clean it with a scrub brush or power washer to remove dirt and chalking. Let it dry completely, which can take a week. Replace cracked, split, or rotted boards. If you're painting, be sure all bare wood is primed with the recommended primer for the paint being applied. Remove old, cracked caulking and fill cracks around windows, doors, and trim with acrylic caulk.

#### 4 Avoid color mismatches.

You can get color differences from can to can based on the store and even who mixes the paint. Be sure to have all the paint mixed at the same time or buy it from the same batch codes. For the best uniformity, mix all the paint together in a large container, then return it to the original cans.



#### 6 Choose the right brushes.

Even with the right prep and paint, using the wrong brush can mar the final result. Synthetic or natural-bristle brushes are fine for oil-based (alkyd) paints. But stick with synthetic brushes, especially nylon, for latex paint because natural bristles are hollow and can clump as they absorb the water in latex. Synthetic bristles also tend to provide cleaner, more even brush strokes with latex. If you're doing the painting or staining, look for angled bristles for more precision around windows and doors. Be sure the brush fits snugly in your hand. And dampen bristles before use so they load the paint or stain more evenly.

#### 5 Check the forecast.

Many paints applied in cold weather might not dry properly, resulting in poor adhesion. What's more, rain can wash paint right off the siding if it hasn't dried. Temperatures between 60 and 85 degrees with little or no wind are ideal. Also try to avoid painting in direct sunlight, which may cause blistering. Be willing to postpone the job if necessary.

#### 7 Insist on a guarantee from pros.

In addition to the specifics of the paint or stain to be applied, any contract you're asked to sign should include the work being done and a clear finish date. Also be sure it includes the painter's promise to correct—at little or no cost—any chipping, peeling, blistering, or flaking that occurs within two years after the job is done. If the pro tells you the paint itself has a warranty, remind him that the paint warranty doesn't include labor, which costs far more.



# closeup

## A TORTURE TEST FOR PAINTS AND STAINS

Most homeowners refinish their siding every six to 10 years. To find out which paints or stains will probably last that long on your house, we begin by spreading those finishes over untreated yellow-pine boards. Those boards tend to swell and crack, creating an especially tough test. Then we face the boards south at a 45-degree angle from vertical on the roof of our Yonkers, N.Y., headquarters. That intensifies the effects of sun and the elements, allowing each year of outdoor testing to equal roughly three years on your home. Here's what we check for:

**Dirt buildup.** Airborne particles cling to paint and stain after several years, promoting mildew. As the Ratings show, many paints looked dirty after the equivalent of three years on a house, and all of them appeared soiled after the equivalent of nine years. Cleaning the dirt involves scrubbing or pressure-washing.

**Color change.** Over time, sunlight causes paint or stain to fade, change color, or develop a chalky film on its surface. Some paints changed color after only a year of testing. The only alternative to tolerating it is refinishing.

**Mildew.** Stains and spotting from mildew are common on northern exposures and in damp, shaded areas. Removal involves scrubbing with a solution of bleach and water.

**Cracking.** All of our tested paints resisted cracking. But most semitransparent stains allowed our pine boards to crack more readily than with opaque stains. If you see cracks on your siding, we recommend refinishing before they worsen and cause more damage.



**RACKED WITH PAINT** Our rooftop tests mimic nine years of weathering.

# Ratings paints

• **Availability** Most products at stores through spring 2009.

Excellent Very good Good Fair Poor



1 California



2 Kelly-Moore



4 Valspar



5 Valspar

Within types, in performance order. Blue key numbers indicate Quick Picks.

Key number	Product	Price per gallon	Overall score	Appearance			Resists		
				After 3 yr.	After 6 yr.	After 9 yr.	Dirt	Color change	Mildew
<b>FULLY TESTED</b> Completed the equivalent of nine years' exposure.									
1	California 2010 (flat)	\$38	61	●	●	○			
2	Kelly-Moore Acry-Shield (flat)	32	60	●	●	○			
3	California 2010 Eggshell (low luster)	40	59	●	●	○			
4	Valspar Ultra Premium Satin (low luster)	24	58	●	●	○			
5	Valspar Ultra Premium Semi-gloss	25	58	●	●	○			
6	California 2010 Satin (low luster)	42	57	●	●	○			
7	Sears Weatherbeater Ultra (flat)	24	56	●	●	○			
8	Olympic Premium (flat)	19	51	●	○	○			
9	Cabot The Finish (low luster)	33	47	●	○	○			
10	Olympic Premium Satin (low luster)	21	46	●	○	○			
<b>STILL BEING TESTED</b> Completed the equivalent of six years' exposure.									
11	Kelly-Moore Acry-Shield (semigloss)	37		●	●				
12	Kilz Casual Colors (flat)	20		●	●				
13	Kilz Casual Colors (low luster)	22		●	●				
14	Kilz Casual Colors (semigloss)	23		●	●				
15	M.A.B. Sea Shore (flat)	39		●	●				
16	M.A.B. Sea Shore (low luster)	40		●	●				
17	Valspar Ultra Premium Duramax (flat)	30		●	●				
18	Valspar Ultra Premium Duramax Satin (low luster)	33		●	●				
<b>INITIALLY PROMISING</b> Completed the equivalent of three years' exposure.									
19	California Fresh Coat Velvet (flat)	34		●					
20	Ace Royal Shield (low luster)	24		●					
21	Ace Royal Shield (semigloss)	25		●					
22	Behr Premium Plus (semigloss)	26		●					
23	Behr Premium Plus Ultra (flat)	32		●					
24	Behr Premium Plus Ultra (low luster)	34		●					
25	Behr Premium Plus Ultra (semigloss)	35		●					
26	Behr Premium Plus (flat)	23		●					
27	Benjamin Moore Moorlife (flat)	35		●					
28	Benjamin Moore Moorgard (low luster)	46		●					
29	Benjamin Moore Moorglo Soft Gloss (semigloss)	49		●					
30	Olympic Premium (semigloss)	22		●					

# Ratings stains

• **Availability** Most products at stores through spring 2009.

Excellent Very good Good Fair Poor



1 Olympic



2 Behr



6 Thompson's

Within types, in performance order. Blue key numbers indicate Quick Picks.

Product	Type	Price per gallon	Overall score	Appearance			Resists			
				After 3 yr.	After 6 yr.	After 9 yr.	Dirt	Color change	Mildew	Cracking

**FULLY TESTED** Completed the equivalent of up to nine years' exposure.

1	Olympic Premium 596xx (latex)	opaque	\$21	65	+	+	○	*	*	*	*
2	Behr Plus 10 (alkyd/water cleanup)	opaque	20	55	+	○	○	*	*	*	*
3	Cabot O.V.T. 6500 (alkyd)	opaque	30	48	+	○	○	*	*	*	*
4	Thompson's Water Seal Deck & House (latex)	opaque	18	44	+	○	○	*	*	*	*
5	Glidden Endurance 2200 line (latex)	opaque	17	37	○	○	○	*	*	*	*
6	Thompson's Water Seal Deck & House (latex)	semi-transparent	18	32	+	○	●	*	*	*	*
7	Sikkens Rubbol (alkyd)	opaque	34	27	○	○	○	*	*	*	*
8	Olympic Oil Stain 511xx (alkyd)	semi-transparent	19	21	○	○	○	*	*	*	*
9	Thompson's Water Seal Deck & House (alkyd)	semi-transparent	21	12	○	○	○	*	*	*	*
10	Behr Deck Plus Deck, Fence & Siding 3xx (alkyd/water cleanup)	semi-transparent	22	12	○	○	○	*	*	*	*
11	Olympic Maximum Deck, Fence & Siding (alkyd/water cleanup)	semi-transparent	26	12	○	○	○	*	*	*	*

**STILL BEING TESTED** Completed the equivalent of three to six years' exposure.

12	Behr Deck Plus Deck, Fence & Siding 200 line (latex)	opaque	23		+	+	○	*	*	*	*
13	Sears Weatherbeater Deck, Fence & Siding (latex)	opaque	18		+	○	○	*	*	*	*
14	M.A.B. Timber (latex)	opaque	29		+	○	○	*	*	*	*

## Guide to the Ratings

**Overall score** for paints is a weighted average of appearance for a white, blue, and brown version. We apply two coats to primed pine-clapboard siding. **Overall score** for stains is a weighted average of appearance for a red, green, and white version, where available. We apply one or two coats of stain to untreated pine-clapboard siding according to manufacturers' directions. Fully tested finishes undergo three-year accelerated weathering or until their appearance has fallen to "fair," which would require reapplication. Each year of testing equates to about three years on vertical surfaces; performance on decks and other horizontal surfaces will differ. Displayed scores are rounded; models are listed in order of precise overall score. Models still under test are listed alphabetically according to their years of testing and current-year score. **Type** for stains is opaque or semitransparent, ranging from tinted to nearly opaque. **Appearance** scores summarize long-term testing. **Resists dirt** shows which paints or stains best resist dirt buildup. **Resists color change** shows which hold up well to sunlight and change the least from the original color. **Resists mildew** shows which best prevent mildew growth. **Resists cracking** shows which stains discouraged cracked boards; all tested paints resisted cracking. **Price** is the approximate average per gallon container.

## CR Quick Recommendations

Our highest-grade paints should give you a finish that still looks good after roughly nine years, assuming they're applied correctly. Stains require less prep work and, typically, only one coat instead of the two we recommend for paints. But because most stains don't resist cracking as well, you'll probably apply them more often.

Our results include many well-known brands. If you still don't find your favorite, it's because the formula we tested is no longer available. Our results with the old formulation might not match what you'd get with the newer one, so we remove all paints or stains that have been reformulated since our tests and begin retesting the new formulation.

While stains include opaques and semi-transparent, paints bring a litany of terms that include eggshell, low luster, satin, and semigloss. Note that all of those mean glossier than flat.

The **Ratings** rank products by overall performance. **Quick Picks** offer the best combination of performance and value.

## QUICK PICKS

### Best flat paint:

- 1 California \$38
- 2 Kelly-Moore \$32

California 2010 is a top-performing line in our tests and is available in 25 states. Kelly-Moore, another regional brand sold in 9 states, performed well and costs roughly the same. Among last year's top picks: California Fresh Coat Velvet, which we're retesting, and Glidden Spred Dura, which was reformulated.

### Best if you want a glossier paint:

- 4 Valspar \$24
- 5 Valspar \$25

Both of these paints performed well, cost about the same, and are sold nationwide at Lowe's. Last year's top-scoring Glidden Spred Dura Gloss and Satin have both been reformulated.

### Best stains:

- 1 Olympic \$21
- 2 Behr \$20
- 6 Thompson's \$18

All three were also top picks last year and are sold nationwide. The Olympic is sold at Lowe's and at independent retailers, while Behr is a Home Depot brand. Between the opaques, choose the Olympic for its wide range of protection, the Behr where dirt is less of an issue. No semi-transparent lasts as long, but go with two coats of the Thompson's if you value seeing the grain enough to restrain more often than with an opaque stain.