



Two truths about porches: It's not always easy to add (or replace) one that's compatible, and they tend to rot. Help is at hand from period-friendly porch systems and new wood substitutes.

BY MARY ELLEN POLSON

new porches

OLD HOUSES ENDURE, but not so much the porches that give them character. Left unpainted, even first-growth millwork will eventually splinter and rot, especially if it's been fancifully scroll-cut. So if your porch is in good shape, count yourself fortunate (and keep a paintbrush handy). For those longing to re-create a period porch, you are in luck: Recent innovations in building materials make it possible to hit all the architectural high notes—often without requiring the kind of skilled construction that's been hard to come by since World War II.

Components like chamfered porch posts and spindle-and-rail balustrades, long milled from lumber, are now also available in second- or third-generation composite materials that offer some real advantages over wood. Among them are offerings like Fypon's synthetic QuickRail system. It comes with all the parts for a section of balustrade: top and bottom rail, square spindles or turned balusters, brackets, and screws. The rail kit attaches easily to the maker's QuickPost kit, or to an existing post or column.

For enclosed and screened porches, several companies offer porch systems, wherein period-friendly panels are installed within a framework. Typically, the panels accept both screens and storms, so they offer the potential for three- or even four-season use. Vixen Hill's cedar system is designed



LEFT: Fypon's new QuickPost system helps you build a period-look porch from kit parts. **TOP:** Stronger new composites (like these balusters from Fypon's QuickRail kits) are an alternative to wood. **ABOVE:** Chamfered posts, ornamental spindles, brackets and dentils make a timeless porch—and this one's new. **OPP.:** A Steamboat Gothic porch, replicated on an old house in Houston.



ALTERNATIVES TO WOOD

Wood remains the standard for structural porch elements like posts and columns and for highly visible decorative elements like fretwork around the landing. But even old-growth and rot-resistant woods like mahogany and cedar require maintenance, especially when they are weathering in extreme climates. Some acceptable alternatives:

- **Composites** are cellular PVC and reinforced polymers that have been cast, extruded, or wound with fiberglass. These low-maintenance, water-, fire-, and insect-proof materials are stronger than concrete or steel, so they're ideal for structural elements that are expensive made of wood, like columns. Some versions have the same color and texture

throughout and never need painting, and the best are UV resistant so they won't change color.

- **Polyurethanes** are high-density thermoplastics made in molds. For decorative and non-structural elements like corbels, they offer real advantages over wood. They can be cut and shaped (even shaved!) easily, and once painted, won't shrink or swell.

- **Stamped sheet-metal** ornaments in zinc, copper, aluminum, or bronze may be used as decorative embellishment corbel brackets, capitals, garlands, panel ornament, scrolls, wreaths, classical moldings, shields, etc.). Outdoors, zinc and aluminum must be painted, but stamped metal is durable and costs less than many other materials.



LEFT: On this transitional 1903 house, the diamond ornament is made of pressed metal; note the ornaments, too, in the gables. **TOP LEFT:** On a Chicago Foursquare, posts on the newly reopened porch are inlaid with mosaic glass, giving the impression of double columns.

like their screen/storm doors, with screen and tempered-glass inserts.

Porch panels and transoms from Touchstone Woodworks are made of the same 1¼"-thick mahogany as the company's screen doors, and buyers have a choice of 70 period styles and period-appropriate hardware. Changing to glass extends use of the porch or outdoor room in spring and fall, and also protects the room's finishes and furniture from dust, pollen, rain and snow.

Although there is this newfound abundance in interchangeable parts, it's still critical to pay attention to scale and the subtle design elements. Keep in mind that a porch should look tailor-made for the house. It's always a good idea consult an architect or designer. A good designer will be up on the newest materials and how best to make use of them, and will ensure that the new porch looks like it belongs on the house.

NOW COMPANIES OFFER PORCH PANEL SYSTEMS WITH INTERCHANGEABLE SCREENS & GLASS.



ABOVE: This three-season, Prairie-style porch from Touchstone Woodworks is made from mahogany panels. **LEFT:** An old-fashioned, screened front porch built using Vixen Hill's system becomes a sunroom when the screens are replaced by glass. **BELOW:** Another Vixen Hill project: this new gazebo-like sunroom/porch is period friendly.



"Everything is about detail," says architect Thom Greene of Greene & Proppe Design in Chicago, who has made a specialty of period porch restoration and creation for late-19th- and early-20th-century homes.

When a porch is completely missing, Greene starts by looking for style clues, including "ghosting," outlines that indicate a lost architectural element. He'll also consider period design elements from the inside of the house—balusters or the newel post on a staircase, for instance—and work from there. "Sometimes there are no clues, and we just look to the

period and create what would have been appropriate then," he says.

Such was the case with a 1903 frame house in a historic neighborhood. The owner wanted a wrap-around porch, Greene explains, but there were few details to go by. One clue: a diamond-shaped ornament on the upper level of the façade, made of pressed metal rather than wood. That led to an order for pressed-metal flourishes for the two porch gables, placed with W.F. Norman, a company in business since 1898.

In the instance of a Prairie-style Foursquare with a porch that

had been enclosed, the owners gave the architects carte-blanche to create a porch in keeping with the style of the house. There was little in the way of past history under the aluminum siding, so they designed decorative elements in an Arts & Crafts mode, ramped up with decorative brackets and inlaid iridescent glass mosaic tile strips in the porch posts.

"It was very civic-minded of our clients to open up to the street and be neighborly," says Greene. "The house is a strong, big-shouldered house; the porch and some other elements lighten it up." ♦

PORCH SYSTEMS

- **AMERICANA** (800) 269-5697, shutterblinds.com *Roll-down porch shades*
- **CINDERWHIT & CO.** (800) 527-9064, cinderwhit.com *Porch parts in Western red cedar*
- **CONNECTICUT SCREEN WORKS** (203) 741-0859, connscreen.com *Porch enclosures, proprietary snap and screen wall systems for porches*
- **COPPA WOODWORKING** (310) 548-4142, coppawoodworking.com *Screened panels for porches, Victorian-era screen doors*
- **FYPON LTD.** (800) 446-3040, fypon.com *QuickRail and Balustrade porch components in multi-layered extrusions*
- **MCCOY MILLWORK** (888) 236-0995, mccoymillwork.com *Fir porch flooring, period-correct porch rails; cast composite columns*
- **PACIFIC COLUMNS** (800) 294-1098, pacificcolumns.com *Wood and composite columns and porch parts*
- **PHANTOM SCREENS** (888) 742-6866, phantomscreens.com *Retractable screens that slide out of sight when not in use*
- **TOUCHSTONE WOODWORKS** (330) 297-1313, touchstonewoodworks.com *Period-inspired screen/storm wall panels for three-season porches*
- **TURNCRAFT** (800) 423-3311, turncraft.com *Columns, railings, and porch components in wood and composites*
- **VIXEN HILL** (800) 423-2766, vixenhill.com *Three-season modular porch systems*
- **W.F. NORMAN** (800) 641-4038, wfnorman.com *Pressed-metal decorative panels and components*
- **WALSH HOME IMPROVEMENTS** (914) 668-7811, walshhomeimprovements.com *Screen terrace enclosures, retractable screens (door and window), magnetic screens, etc.*
- **WESTERN SPINDLE** (888) 459-9965, westernspindle.com *Spindles and railings in Port Orford cedar and Douglas fir*