

The Washington Post

Printed using recycled fiber

SATURDAY, JULY 12, 2008

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HOME DELIVERY 48¢

Prices may vary in areas outside metropolitan Washington.

Awnings can reduce the amount your house's temperature rises because of sunshine by as much as ...



65%

on windows with southern exposures

77%

on windows with western exposures

Awnings Can Help Homeowners Retreat From Summer's Heat

AWNINGS, From F1

and artwork from fading.

Another plus: You can keep your windows open while it's raining. Additionally, and probably the reason awning manufacturers hear the most, is that awnings can provide shade over a patio or deck.

Sound appealing? First make sure you know where you're shopping for.

Even those in the business use the words "awnings" and "canopies" differently. Some companies define awnings as architectural projections that are fully supported by the building to which they are attached, while canopies have some additional support on their outer edges.

Others consider awnings to be coverings that retractable white canopies are those that are permanent. Still others use the word awnings when referring to residential coverings and canopies for commercial establishments. Many use the terms interchangeably.

Ask.

Updated Materials

In older neighborhoods, you might still see the aluminum awnings popular in the 1940s and 1950s. Indeed, some companies still offer aluminum awnings because they are waterproof and durable.

Early fabric awnings were made of canvas-like cotton duck.

However, both aluminum and cotton have drawbacks. Aluminum awnings are very limited in color and design options. Cotton often stretches or shrinks in reaction to the elements. Designs, such as stripes, were painted on the cotton duck by machine and had a tendency to fade. "They [the fabrics] were unpredictable," said John Thomas, owner of Thomas Shade and Awning in Silver Spring, now celebrating 75 years in business.

Thomas said the biggest enemy to awnings is the sun, not wind or rain. To get a more predictable material, the industry has turned to acrylic-weave fabrics that have color and designs woven in. These fabrics are water-repellent and are usually treated to resist mildew and minimize fading.

Vinyl laminates, which are waterproof, are also available.

Several companies advised staying away from deep colors — especially red — as those tend to fade sooner. Additionally, light colors reflect the sun best, keeping the area under the awning cooler.



Jerry Thompson's 1938 Cape Cod in Vienna has sported a variety of stationary awnings over the years.

Wind sensors, sometimes mounted on the front bar, retract the awning when winds reach 21 to 30 miles an hour. They sense the bounce on the front flap, then signal the motor to pull the awning in.

And, if you want to return to a cool patio after a hard day, a sun sensor can unfurl the canopy automatically.

Jerry Thompson, whose 1938 Cape Cod in Vienna has sported a variety of stationary awnings during the past four decades, doesn't like to rely on such electronics, which he refers to as "toys." "They're just like anything mechanical," he said. "They can break."

The general rule, according to the Professional Awning Manufacturers Association, is, "If you are comfortable sitting outdoors dining or reading the paper, then it is probably safe to operate your awning."

Maintenance

"Frames are for a lifetime; it's the fabric that needs replacing," Thomas said. Dirt can shorten the life of an awning's fabric.

Acrylic fabrics usually require just hosing down occasionally to get rid of bird droppings or debris. A soft-bristle brush and mild soap will clean off stubborn dirt. Thompson, who leaves his awnings up year-round, cleans them about every other year.

Most companies will guarantee fabrics for five years, but Thomas said you can usually count on getting seven to 12 years of life out of them.

You also need to consider drainage, especially on larger awnings. If the fabric isn't taut, puddles may accumulate on top, resulting in sagging.

Shades of Nostalgia

Awnings Can Lower Energy Bills, Protect Furnishings From Fading

By ANN CAMERON SEIGAL
Special to The Washington Post

Patti Lowery fondly recalls the yellow awnings of her D.C. childhood in the 1940s.

"They were lovely, and the lowering of them in the early summer always seemed to mark the season more firmly than arbitrary dates on the calendar," said Lowery, a writer and editor who now lives in Baltimore. "Better, though, they really did provide shade and kept places nearly comfortably cool. I miss them."

Awnings may give a house a nostalgic look, but they perform a thoroughly modern function: They help reduce energy costs.

It's common sense — awnings stop some of the sun's heat before it gets to your windows, while drapes and shades help only after heat enters through the glass. Solar radiation through glass accounts for nearly 20 percent of the load on an air conditioner, according to the American Society of Heating, Refrigerating and Air-Conditioning Engineers.

The Energy Department estimates that awnings can reduce solar heat gain — the amount temperature rises because of sunshine — by as much as 65 percent on windows with southern exposures and 77 percent on those with western exposures.

Robert Martenson, owner of Awnings by Sunair in Jessup, Md., and the fifth generation to enter the family business, said

he has seen an upswing in orders recently. "People are going back to window and door awnings because of energy costs," he said.

According to the Energy Department, a small, horizontal awning will completely shade a south-facing window during the summer. Because of the angle of the sun, an east- or west-facing window needs an awning that extends down to cover a large percentage of the window.

Cooling isn't the only reason to consider awnings. They can enhance also the curb appeal of a house, adding a splash of color or highlighting architectural features. They can also protect carpet, fabrics

See AWNINGS, F9, Col. 1

Styles

Styles have changed considerably since those yellow awnings of Lowery's childhood.

Those awnings were manually pulled up during a storm, and the resulting folds were perfect water collectors. Lowery described the results in a recent e-mail: "When you lowered them again — Whoosh! A little Niagara tumbled out. What a treat for a little kid."

Today, awnings can be stationary or retractable, slanted or domed, with sides or without. Myriad valances can be added, too.

Thomas said stationary awnings are designed to withstand severe weather, including wind. Fixed-frame awnings usually need to be custom-made, however, and require up to six weeks from order to installation. And custom-made awnings are more expensive than retractable awnings. A traditional fixed awning for a three-foot-by-five-foot window can run several hundred dollars.

The awning industry's main focus today seems to be on retractable awnings for patios and decks. When the awning is closed via a roller mechanism, only the valance shows. There are no folds where water can accumulate. The turnaround time from order to installation is quicker, and because they are often made by machine to standard sizes, the cost per square foot is lower — though very low prices can signal poorer mechanical reliability.

Years ago, patio awnings were a hand-cranked gamble demanding constant attention. If a storm came up while you were away, you might have returned to find your awning in tatters.

The wind's uplifting action would put tremendous force on the awning and at the point of attachment. "The builder [of a house] had no idea you were going to attach fabric 12 feet out," Thomas said.

Technology has stepped up to minimize weather problems. You no longer have to be on hand or run outside to tend your awning. Remote-control devices or switches let you open and close them from inside the house.

Wind and rain sensors are also available to automatically tend the awning when you are not home.

Up All Year?

Many homeowners hire a company to take their awnings down in the fall and put them back up in the spring. Depending on the complexity of installation, that may add several hundred dollars to your annual maintenance costs. The trade-off is that the company will store the awnings for you, which can extend the life of the fabric.

Whether to leave awnings up in winter is part practicality and part personal preference. Leaving awnings up, thereby reducing the sun's warming, may actually increase your winter heating costs.

You also need to consider whether a specific awning is designed to withstand the snow load likely in your area. That depends on the strength of the frame and the slope of the awning. Welded frames are stronger than those with pieces that slip together. Traditional window awnings usually have a 45-degree angle, so snow and ice slide off.

Another consideration is mental health, Thomas said. Many folks need to have more light in the winter. However, while older awnings were opaque, now you can get fabrics that are translucent, providing filtered shade in the summer but letting some light through in the winter.

Other Considerations

There's a reason you don't see awnings in many newer communities locally, said John Weir of Carroll Awning Co. in Baltimore: homeowner association rules.

Many associations regulate exterior changes to a house, including color schemes and materials. Awnings may not be an option.

An industry-financed study last year by the Center for Sustainable Building Research at the University of Minnesota hints that revisiting such limitations might be beneficial. It stated: "While awnings on individual homes can reduce air conditioning usage and costs, when a neighborhood collectively uses awnings, the entire community benefits. The collective reduction of energy usage reduces the overall demand on the energy infrastructure, subsequently preventing blackouts."