

TOPIC: **HOME REPAIR & DIY**

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Bring Vintage Windows Back To Life | 5 Ways to Love Old Houses

Vintage window restorer Alison Hardy's mission is to open homeowners' eyes to the value and practicality of what they already have.

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★★★★☆

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By Sue Hertz

To Alison Hardy, the three windows in what would be the breakfast nook looked fine. They were firm to the touch, sturdy in the joints, and so lovely with the intricate lattice woodwork. Sure, they were chipped, and dark, and sort of grimy. But so was the rest of this former church parsonage on busy Middle Street in Portsmouth, New Hampshire. Empty for two years, the rambling shingled building built in 1902 was about to undergo a major rehab, and Hardy's mission was to rescue not just these three beauties but all of the home's original windows from ending up in the dumpster.



Alison Hardy, founder of Window Woman of New England.
Kindra Clineff

Clipboard in hand, Hardy toured the rest of the home on that late fall day, jotting down notes about each window. Stained a deep brown, most had multiple panes over one larger pane, and, like the ones in the breakfast nook, were dirty. Cracked here and there. But they opened and closed and weren't gunked up with decades of paint. Easily fixed.

The owner, Richard Cyr, a retired marketing entrepreneur, had read volumes about the value of restoring old windows versus replacing them, and nodded as Hardy confirmed his research. But, he said, as they shook hands good-bye, she'd need to convince his wife, Lisa DeStefano, an architect, who was

determined to install new ones.

Hardy didn't need much prep for the meeting. She is, after all, Window Woman of New England, and for more than a decade she has divided her days between first convincing home-owners and contractors, and then restoring those antique windows. And while she is not alone in the task—20-plus window restorers are based in New England alone—she is perhaps the most visible. From a one-woman show working out of her Topsfield, Massachusetts, barn to a staff of 12 in a 4,800-square-foot shop by the Powwow River in Amesbury, she and her team juggle at any one time 10 to 20 projects, from glazing a couple of six-over-six sashes for a Newburyport woman to fully restoring 63 windows of a Brattle Street mansion in Cambridge. She organizes conferences, attends trade shows, holds workshops. And she is founder and president of the Window Preservation Alliance, which represents restorers across the country. Together, she believes, their voice is louder. "People don't know their options," she says.



Hardy and another member of her team, Kevin Prickett, get down to business at Steve Garey's Queen Anne home in Reading, Massachusetts.

Kindra Clineff

In her mid-50s, with short graying hair and a penchant for polos and khakis, she is as unassuming as a history teacher, which is fitting: Hardy believes her job is to educate, just as she first taught herself. Tired of living in old homes with porous windows, she sought guidance from books and the guy at the hardware store—how to repair the pulley system of weights and chains, and how to glaze, to apply just the right amount of putty at just the right angle with just the right pressure. She restored the wobbly windows of a friend, and then another friend, and soon she had a business, which morphed into obsession.

She wants the “window decision” to be based on facts, not myth. She wants homeowners to understand that original windows can be just as energy efficient as thermal panes if outfitted with weather-stripping, protected by storm windows, and properly fitted, repaired, glazed, and painted. Study after study proves it. Hardy’s thermal camera proves it, revealing that air infiltration between the new and the old is about the same. That convinced Steve Garey, who had planned to replace most of the windows in the stately Queen Anne he purchased in his hometown of Reading, Massachusetts. “I had a mind shift” after reading Hardy’s studies, he admits.

Hardy wants homeowners to know that while windows built before 1960 were designed to last, newer windows have a finite life-span, with 20 years being the average warranty. It has to do with craftsmanship (old sashes benefit from mortise-and-tenon joinery, which allows the wood to expand and contract), but also materials: Antique windows were built with old-growth wood, which is denser and rot-resistant from centuries of undisturbed development in virgin forests. With the depletion of those forests, wood for newer windows is produced on tree farms and harvested after 10 to 20 years, which is not enough time for it to develop resistance to the elements or the tight growth rings that provide strength. Other sash materials, such as vinyl, can warp and discolor. Vinyl over wood protects until it doesn’t, when moisture seeps in between the two surfaces and the wood decays.



Hardy double-checks the fit at Garey's house.

Kindra Clineff

Hardy wants homeowners to know that the single panes of glass in old windows can be easily replaced. By contrast, thermal panes are uninterrupted layers of glass separated by an insulated gas. In time, the seal holding the panes in place breaks and moisture invades. The glass becomes cloudy. Consequently, the replacement window requires a replacement. "That's not very green," says Hardy.

And she wants homeowners to honor aesthetics, to appreciate that the original windows were designed to adorn the house. They are properly proportioned with proper period detail. The snap-in grilles and simulated divided panes of replacements can't come close to the delicate quarter-round and fillet pattern

of Federal-period muntins, the wooden bars that hold the glass panes. As Marc Bagala, a window restorer in Westbrook, Maine, likes to say, installing replacement windows in a historic home is like putting mag wheels on a Model T.

In Lisa DeStefano's downtown Portsmouth office, Hardy quickly deduced that her client's resistance to restoration was aesthetic: The architect loathed aluminum storm windows. Hardy couldn't argue—some storms *are* ugly—but suggested that the slim-profile models with low-e glass, which minimizes ultraviolet light, could be an option. Besides, she asked, with storm-free thermal windows, what would they do about screens? Richard Cyr sat quietly, letting the two women debate.

By the meeting's end, Hardy had convinced DeStefano that her team would make the originals as crisp and functional as new models. They agreed to restore 30 windows and replace eight, all of which were replacements themselves.

It was time to talk price.

Restoring windows isn't cheap. Hardy's services range from \$350 to \$1,800 per window. She makes no apologies. The work is labor-intensive, whether the project is a tune-up (weather-stripping, replacing broken sash cords with cords or chains, chipping out old glazing, replacing broken panes), a renovation (a tune-up plus joint repair, stripping, priming, and painting the exterior), or a full restoration, which often involves sawing, sanding, and cajoling tiny pieces of wood into muntin gaps. Often, wood is harvested from salvaged sashes to replace rotted areas. Original glass is reinstalled. The end result for Garey was startling: Cracked sashes held together by paint returned to him whole, the delicate muntin design clear and crisp as a showroom exhibit.



Lisa DeStefano in her family's 1902 former parsonage in Portsmouth, New Hampshire. Of the home's scores of windows, Hardy restored 30 and replaced only eight.

Kindra Clineff

When prospective customers say new windows are less expensive, Hardy shrugs. Initially, perhaps. But then add the cost of installation and replacing the replacement. She'll work out deals if she can. Garey bartered a lower price by agreeing to paint. Richard Cyr benefited from volume. "Whatever," she says, knowing that battles are often won with small concessions. In her case, a slight profit margin.

"We're getting there," she says with a sigh. Membership in the Window Preservation Alliance is rising, and, she hopes, the more restorers, the more information, the better shot at saving what many call the eyes of the home. Historic district regulations help, too.

Cyr and DeStefano faced pressure from the Portsmouth Historic Commission, which took keen interest in their home because of its architectural significance. Cyr reports that all parties are pleased. "These windows are almost 120 years old and, brought back, they're good for another 120," he says.

DeStefano nods. "Our house has a soul," she says, opening the blinds on her bedroom window, now painted white. "It was the right thing to do for the house."

VINTAGE WINDOW RESTORERS

Looking for a vintage window restorer to doctor your panes? Here's a quick selection of New England vintage window restorers; for more, check out the Window Preservation Alliance website (windowpreservationalliance.org).

Window Woman of New England/Alison Hardy, Amesbury, MA
978-532-2070; window-woman.com

Bagala Window Works/Marc Bagala, Westbrook, ME
207-887-9231; bagalawindowworks.com

Heartwood Window Restoration/Jade L. Mortimer, Charlemont, MA
413-625-8680; heartwoodrestoration.com

Olde Window Restorers/Dave Bowers, Weare, NH
603-529-0261; oldwindowrestorer.com

Window Master/David Voorhis, Dublin, NH
603-563-7788; windowmasternh.com

Winn Mountain Restorations/Andrew Roeper, Lyndeborough, NH
603-654-2115; winnmountainrestorations.com

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Comments

Judy January 2, 2017

Alison Hardy works wonders with old windows! I've been following her progress for many years. Her passion for old houses inspired me to focus my house restoration business in Portland, Oregon, on saving original windows, and teaching homeowners how to do much of the restoration work themselves!

Reply

Deb December 27, 2016

For those in the Boston area, Boston Building Resources offers workshops where homeowners can learn to do window restoration work themselves.

Reply
