

How To Decorate Your Windows

By Carl Ford

Today there are a lot of options for dealing with one of the most difficult decorating problems – window coverings and treatments. And, with the rise of home decorating centers and the increasing presence of design consultants and other knowledgeable staff at your local department stores and other venues, your chances have never been better of creating unique, custom window treatments that do exactly what you want them to and look good doing it. Shades, blinds, sheers, drapery panels and valances, window scarves and other decorative elements all come in a dizzying variety of sizes, colors and materials.

The first step, as always, is assessing the kinds of windows you have to cover and the basic style of your home. Remember, window coverings, for the most part, stay with your house when you sell it. Blinds, shades, shutters and the like, and their design, look and quality can have an effect on the future sale of your home as well as your current comfort and convenience. So if you have the urge to be wild, either express it inexpensively or save it for secondary windows.

Rooms can have a variety of windows in a variety of sizes, each of which call for a different type of window treatment to make using the windows as convenient as possible. You probably don't want a set of horizontal blinds covering a set of French doors or casement windows, unless they're attached to the moving parts of the windows themselves. Vertical blinds are perceived as primarily modern. Roller shades come in a variety of weights and fabrications that block light or let filtered light through. Shutters are expensive, difficult to fit correctly, but can be a real enhancement to a traditional room or décor. Horizontal blinds come in a variety of slat-widths, a variety of materials and a rainbow of colors. They also operate by a variety of mechanisms -- some, particularly wooden blinds, have decorative cloth tape hiding the "strings." Others do not. Some are made to last a lifetime, others unfortunately not. Like most home basics, these types of underlying, utilitarian window coverings are not the place to skimp on quality. They're an annoyance when they break, they can be difficult to replace and they need to work properly for the life of your home. Of course, all of these window treatments are available in custom sizes and materials, in some cases for less than you might think, and a set of custom blinds or shutters just might be beautiful enough in their simplicity to save you money on further window treatments.

Once you've decided on these window basics, you can begin adding features and fabrics to make windows a focal point, create an illusion or provide insulation or light filtering properties. Starting from the inside, a simple rod with sheer panels can create a light and airy effect. These can be traditional white or in any number of colors. Other casual drapes can be layered with or over a set

of sheers – light, easy draping panels, usually unlined, with either rod or tab tops, are available in fabrics from soft microfibers to washed silks, cotton velvets and any number of combinations and colors. Decorative rods, rings, finials and tie-backs can all help these easy-to-install draperies transform a room without huge out-of-pocket expenditure. Often, they're inexpensive enough that your window treatments can be seasonal – light and airy sheers and silks in summer; velvets, jacquards and damasks in winter. Buy some extra fabric or an extra panel to upholster a padded pelmet or valance. Cover some throw pillows or slipcover some chairs and you can have a coordinated effect at a bargain price.

The next step up from these mix and match selections is, of course, traditional draperies, whether made to measure or custom-made. Usually these are lined and pinch-pleated and made for what are called “draw” or “traverse” rods -- rods with little dangling holes for drapery hooks which allow them to be drawn. These can be layered with a set of sheers and a set of draperies. Drapes come in a variety of standard widths or they can be custom-made. Part of the advantage of these types of installations is that they can be used most effectively to create the illusion of larger windows or a window wall where none exists. These types of drapes, usually lined and sometimes insulated, also provide extra protection from winter cold and summer heat. With all draperies, blinds or shades are recommended, as direct sunlight can fade and ruin a pair of expensive draperies far quicker than you think – a surprise that can be avoided by a simple, five-dollar, light-blocking roller shade.

Finally, there are a variety of ways to cover the top of the window as well. These are sometimes necessary if an unattractive rod or mechanism shows, but are usually nice just to provide a finished look. Fabric valances are sort of like bed skirts for your windows, adding an extra decorative element and covering up all of the mechanics at the top of the window. More and more popular these days are the more rigid “pelmets,” constructed from wood. These can be stained or painted to match surrounding paneling, molding, stencils or wallpaper. They can also be upholstered and padded with matching or contrasting fabric to add elegance and a finished look to an elaborate window treatment.

There are a number of more casual treatments like tropical blinds made out of bamboo or natural materials. You can treat your windows with many types of roll or pull-up shades in cotton duck or other durable fabrics or you can use elaborate layers of draperies, swags, valances and scarves in the heaviest satins and silks with huge bows, tie backs, ropes and other decorative elements. There are even, conveniently enough, electrically operated and remote controlled shades and blinds for two story windows and skylights.