

Seattle homes live a hard life. Wind-driven rain, sideways hail a few days each winter, marine air that sneaks into every seam, and the occasional heat wave that bakes south and west elevations. Exterior trim and siding take that abuse first. When you spot peeling paint at window casings, swelling at corner boards, or soft spots under a sill, the question arrives fast: can we repair this or is it time to replace?

I've spent years walking Seattle neighborhoods from Ballard to Beacon Hill, inspecting fascia, frieze, belly bands, and every species of window and door trim. Some houses only need a weekend of careful exterior trim repair and selective caulking. Others hide a slow-motion disaster of dry rot that has crept behind the cladding. This guide is the decision-making process I use with homeowners and builders, with examples from jobs where the line between trim and siding repair blurred and we had to rethink the plan.

What Seattle's climate does to trim

Trim fails differently here than in drier climates. Moisture cycling is constant, and UV exposure can be intense for long summer days. Paint flexes, then cracks. Caulk joints pull open as wood moves with humidity. Micro-gaps at flashing let wind-driven rain slip behind the trim. If the trim is finger-jointed pine or another absorbent softwood, it drinks water. If the back face wasn't primed at install, that moisture has an easy path.

Fiber-cement trim holds up to water better, but it is brittle at nail penetrations and edges. If it's installed tight to decks or rooflines without the right clearance, saturation and wicking still cause failures. PVC trim shrugs off water, yet it expands and contracts with temperature, so fasteners and joints demand more attention.

Add poorly detailed flashing, clogged gutters that overflow at the rafter tails, and settled caulk lines, and Seattle becomes a perfect lab for dry rot. I've seen rot around otherwise healthy windows simply because a tiny head flashing gap poured water into the side jamb every storm for five winters.

The early tells: what you can spot before opening walls

Before any ladder work, walk the perimeter after a storm. Focus on bottom edges and horizontal surfaces. Look for paint blistering, hairline cracks, and tan or gray discoloration at miter joints. Tap suspect areas with a screwdriver handle. Solid wood rings and rebounds. Rot dulls the sound. If the tip sinks easily into a corner board or sill, you have decay.

Common Seattle trouble spots:

- Bottom corners of window trim, especially where a miter meets a sill. The joint opens, water pools, and capillary action pulls moisture inside the end grain.
- Belly bands and water tables on older craftsman homes. These horizontal trims catch water. If the back side was never back-primed, rot can start from the wall face, invisible until late.
- Garage door side jambs. Snow melt, car wash runoff, and splashback rot the bottom 6 to 12 inches.
- Fascia behind a leaky gutter. Overflow tends to pick a favorite spot at the low point of the run and stay there.
- Trim sitting tight to concrete patios or stoops. Code and manufacturer instructions call for clearance, typically 1 to 2 inches. Without it, wicking is inevitable.

If you see mushrooms, a coffee-brown spongy area, or white stringy mycelium, that's active fungal decay. At that stage, a patch rarely holds.

When repair makes sense

Repair shines when damage is isolated and the surrounding system still works. Expect to repair if the decay is confined to one or two trim boards, the sheathing behind them is dry and sound, and the water entry point is easy to correct.

Examples that repair well:

- The bottom 4 inches of a vertical corner board are soft, but the board above is solid and siding seams are tight. A scarfed-in Dutchman, primed on all sides and glued, can outlast the original piece if you also correct the splashback source.
- A single window sill nose is punky from sun and water exposure, yet the side jambs test firm and the housewrap behind is dry. Mill a new sill nose or install a factory sill replacement kit, then integrate the sill flashing properly with the existing WRB.

- PVC or fiber-cement trim cracked at a miter on a south elevation. No rot, just movement. Reset fasteners, rejoin the miter with a structural adhesive, sand, and repaint with a flexible sealant at the joint.

Repair is also pragmatic for budget and timing. If you plan a full exterior repaint in two to three years, strategic house trim repair now can stop further deterioration so the big project goes smoothly later. Use quality materials and prep. Repairs fail when someone slaps on a wood filler over damp rot and paints it the same day.

When replacement is the smarter play

Replacement becomes the better choice if the problem is systemic or hidden. Rot rarely respects board boundaries once it has a water highway.

Signs you should lean toward replacement:

- Multiple adjacent trim pieces show decay or softness. You replace a corner board only to find the adjoining fascia is compromised. That pattern repeats.
- High moisture readings in sheathing behind trim. A pin meter above 20 percent moisture content is a red flag. If readings hover near 16 to 18 percent long after rain, something is keeping that area wet.
- Evidence of failed flashing. Missing head flashings above windows and doors, reverse-lapped housewrap, or cut WRB not taped to new penetrations. If the water management layer is wrong, cosmetic fixes on the skin won't stop inflow.
- Siding is also involved. Once you pull trim and see swollen lap siding, delaminated fiber-cement edges, or carpenter ant galleries, siding repair Seattle options come into play and a piece-meal approach gets expensive per square foot.

For many mid-century and craftsman homes, a targeted siding replacement services Seattle WA scope is the most cost-effective way to reset the envelope. Replace old finger-jointed pine with primed cedar, fiber-cement, or PVC depending on location and aesthetic. Upgrade window and door flashings at the same time. You reduce future maintenance and cut the risk of mold and structural damage that arrives with unchecked leaks.

Understanding dry rot and why it spreads here

Dry rot is a misnomer. Fungi need moisture to grow, typically above 20 percent wood moisture content, and most species thrive between 70 and 90 degrees. Seattle delivers the moisture portion generously. Once fungi colonize wood, they digest structural polymers, leaving a brittle, crumbly matrix that looks dry even if the process relied on periods of wetness.

A trustworthy dry rot repair contractor will look beyond the obvious. When we do a Seattle dry rot inspection, we map moisture, isolate the water source, and open only what we need to see. I've opened trim that looked decent on the face only to discover a rotted back edge where water pooled behind it because of a missing back bevel. I've also seen stucco returns that trapped water against wood trim without a proper separation joint. Context matters. Dry rot repair Seattle projects succeed when the cause is removed first, then the material is replaced.

Wood, fiber-cement, or PVC: choosing replacement materials

Each trim material behaves differently in our climate.

Cedar Cedar handles moisture better than pine and paints beautifully if you prime all faces. Use vertical-grain for stability when you can find it. For belly bands and sill noses, cedar takes a back bevel well so water sheds away from the wall. Pre-prime the back, ends, and cuts. Leave at least 6 to 8 inches clearance from grade.

Primed pine or radiata Budget-friendly, common on 1990s and 2000s builds. It can last, but only if fully sealed and detailed with generous drip edges. In repeated wet zones, I switch to a more durable species or a synthetic.

Fiber-cement trim Durable against moisture and pests. Requires correct clearances at grade, decks, and roofs. Cut edges need priming with manufacturer-approved sealant or paint. It is heavier and brittle, so fastening and handling matter. On taller houses, fiber-cement shines on fascia, frieze, and corner boards.

PVC trim Immune to rot and excellent near splash zones, hose bibs, and roof-to-wall connections. It moves with temperature, so plan for expansion gaps at long runs and use adhesive alongside mechanical fasteners. Paint is optional but helps with UV and color matching.

On many seattle trim repair projects, a hybrid approach makes sense: PVC for horizontal drip-prone parts like sill noses and water tables, cedar for visible verticals where a natural profile matters, fiber-cement for wide corner boards and fascia. Matching profiles and shadow lines to the original style keeps the house looking right.

The true cost of repair vs. replace, and how to compare

Homeowners often ask for a simple number per linear foot. That rarely captures the variables. Access drives the price as much as the material. One-foot repairs on a one-story rambler with flat ground are fast. The same repair three stories up over a sloped yard with tree branches in the way takes a lift or complex staging. Paint scope changes everything as well. Spot painting a patched sill can be a false economy if the blend line is obvious or the existing coating is failing elsewhere.

A practical way to compare:

- Identify the affected areas and any suspect adjacent zones that need proactive attention.
- Estimate repair time including diagnosis, demolition, material milling or matching, priming, install, and paint blending.
- Estimate replacement time for full pieces plus integrated flashing and paint across natural breaks like inside corners or trim intersections.
- Add risk factors: soft sheathing, unknown WRB condition, and roof or deck intersections.

When you do that math, selective repair wins on small, contained issues. Replacement wins once you cross a threshold of two to three interconnected components or any flashing failure. Siding contractors in Seattle often propose alternates for exactly this reason. If you already need scaffolding for one elevation, the incremental cost to replace compromised trim and siding together can beat three separate mobilizations for piecemeal work.

A short case study from North Seattle

A 1928 craftsman had flaking paint at window casings on the west elevation. From the ground, the bottom sill edges looked rough. Moisture meter readings were 12 to 14 percent at the side jambs, 22 to 26 percent at the sill. We started thinking repair. Once we removed the sill nose, we found a missing end dam on the metal head flashing above. Water had been running down the side jamb cavity during storms. The sheathing showed darkening but was still firm.

Decision path:

- Repair head flashing with end dams and integrate with the existing WRB using flexible flashing tape in shingle fashion.
- Replace sill nose with PVC, add a pronounced drip kerf, and back bevel the top.
- Cut out 6 inches of rotten side jambs and splice in new cedar with epoxy-sealed end grain.
- Prime all pieces, paint to the nearest corner.

Two years later, the repaint included the entire elevation. Moisture stayed stable, and the repaired window trims blended seamlessly.

Hidden enemies: fasteners, caulk, and paint

Not every failure is obvious. Fasteners that missed studs and punctured WRB can channel water. Overdriven nails crush wood fibers and crack fiber-cement, admitting moisture. Cheap acrylic caulk shrinks after a year or two of UV and temperature swings. Paint films too tight for our humidity can trap moisture in the wood, causing blistering from the inside out.

Spend more on the details:

- Use high-quality, elastomeric sealants with movement capability. Silicone hybrids and silyl-terminated polyethers do well on exterior trim.
- Prime all sides of wood trim before installation. Pay special attention to end cuts on site. Skipping this step is the most common cause of premature rot I see.
- Choose paint designed for our climate. A flexible, breathable exterior acrylic, properly milled, helps vapor escape without admitting liquid water.
- Use stainless or hot-dipped galvanized fasteners, especially near salt air. Set nails flush, not buried, and backfill exposed heads with a dab of sealant under the paint skin.

What a thorough inspection includes

A Seattle dry rot inspection worth paying for will include both noninvasive and minimally invasive checks. Visual review, moisture mapping with a pin meter, and, when necessary, small exploratory holes at logical water paths. We lift a course of siding or remove a short piece of trim if moisture readings and staining suggest bigger issues behind.

We also look upstream. A sketchy kick-out flashing at a roof-to-wall transition can rot trim ten feet down the wall because water follows surface tension and wind. A leaking balcony door pan will show up first at the belly band below. Gutter slopes, downspout terminations, and soil grading around the foundation all contribute. The aim is to fix the system so repairs last.

Contractor selection in a crowded market

The phrase siding contractors Seattle WA turns up a long list, from one-truck outfits to large firms that tackle full envelope replacements. Your choice depends on scope. For isolated exterior trim repair or targeted dry rot repair, look for a craft-focused team that can mill profiles, work neatly in finished landscapes, and integrate with existing materials. For whole elevations, siding replacement services Seattle WA with in-house crews, scaffolding, and warranty capacity will save headaches.

Ask for:

- Proof of flashing integration details. A good contractor will show photos or drawings of head flashings, end dams, sill pans, and WRB tie-ins.
- Material plan by location. They should be able to explain why they prefer PVC at splash zones, cedar for visible verticals, or fiber-cement for long corner runs.
- Paint system and prep steps, spelled out, including back-priming and end sealing.
- How they handle surprises. Dry rot repair is full of unknowns. You want a clear change-order process with transparent pricing.

I also value contractors who discuss ventilation and interior humidity. If a bathroom fan vents into an attic and condensate drips down the wall cavity, exterior trim takes the blame for what is really an interior moisture problem.

The gray areas: patching vs. splicing vs. unit replacement

[dry rot repair](#)

Some decisions are judgment calls. For example, a window trim with localized decay can be patched with a wood consolidant and exterior epoxy. Done correctly, the repair can last years. Done on damp wood, it peels within a season. Splicing, where you cut out a damaged section and join in new wood with a scarf joint, is stronger than surface patching, yet you must prime and seal the joint thoroughly. Full unit replacement avoids joints entirely but costs more and may trigger larger paint and flashing scopes.

How I decide:

- If the decay depth is less than one-third the board thickness and the substrate is dry and firm, high-quality epoxy can be an efficient fix.
- If decay runs through and the board carries load or sheds water, I splice or replace the full piece.
- If the water source is above the unit and access is open, I lean to replacement so I can reset flashing correctly.

Preventive care that actually works here

Maintenance buys time and is far cheaper than reconstruction. Most [Home page](#) homes only need a couple of targeted tasks each year to prevent costly rot.

- Clean gutters and downspouts before long rain stretches, and check that downspouts throw water away from the siding. If you see tiger-striping on fascia, suspect overflow.
- Inspect caulk at horizontal-to-vertical intersections every spring. Cut out failed beads and recaulk. Do not layer new caulk over cracked lines.
- Keep vegetation trimmed off walls. Wet leaves hold moisture against paint and pry at joints in wind.

- Maintain clearances at the bottom of trim. If mulch or soil has crept up, pull it back to restore airflow and reduce wicking.
- Touch up paint at nicks and open grain on south and west faces. A pint of matching exterior paint and an hour of work can save a board.

Budget planning and phasing for larger scopes

If your home needs both trim and siding work, phasing can spread cost without compromising integrity. Start with the wettest elevation, usually west or south. Address roof-to-wall intersections next. If windows are on the horizon for replacement, avoid expensive trim rebuilds around units that might come out in two years. Temporary protections, like metal head flashings retrofitted above, can bridge the gap.

When you get quotes, ask for alternates that price:

- Repair-only for specific locations
- Replace trim only on a full elevation
- Full trim and siding replacement on a full elevation with upgraded WRB and flashings

That menu clarifies the delta between doing the minimum and resetting the system. It also keeps bids apples-to-apples between siding contractors in Seattle.

What success looks like a year later

After a sound trim and siding repair, you should see stable paint with no new hairline cracks at joints, tight caulk lines that didn't shrink back, and moisture readings in the safe range even after storms. Interior walls adjacent to previously wet areas should feel warmer and drier in winter. Gutters should run clean with no chronic overflow points. On a couple of projects, we also saw energy bills drop slightly, mostly from sealing air paths that water had been exploiting.

If you notice fresh blisters or mushrooming near repaired sections within months, call your contractor. That usually means an overlooked water entry or insufficient end sealing. The sooner it's addressed, the cheaper the fix.

Bringing it back to the core decision

Repair when the damage is limited, the water pathway is fixable without major surgery, and the surrounding materials are healthy. Replace when rot crosses board boundaries, when flashing is suspect, or when multiple components are intertwined. In Seattle's climate, the deciding factor is rarely just the appearance of a board, but the way water moves around and through the assembly.

Choose materials that fit the location, not just the budget. Detail with an eye for drainage, not just sealing. Partner with a dry rot repair contractor who looks for causes before writing a scope. Do that, and the line between repair and replacement becomes sharper, your home stays sound through the rainy months, and you spend less across the next decade.

If you are weighing estimates now, take an hour to walk the house with the contractor and ask them to narrate the water path at each repair area. Good pros can do this in real time. You will hear why a tiny missing drip kerf matters, why a 3-degree back bevel turns into a longer-lasting sill, and why one joint begs for PVC while another begs for cedar. Decisions get easier when the details are visible, and that's how Seattle dry rot repair turns from an emergency into straightforward stewardship of your home.

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