

Do-It-Yourself Cottage Wainscoting

by Ken Evans, cabinetmaker

Wainscoting looks great at the cottage, and summer is a perfect time to make it happen. An informal beaded design looks best in a casual country retreat, and milling your own on-site with a portable router table isn't complicated or time consuming if you choose the right approach.

Most woodworkers smile when they see how easy it is to turn ordinary, inexpensive 1 x 6 tongue and groove pine boards into classic, beaded wainscot. Sure, you could use the same 'V'-matched lumber or factory-cut beadboard that everyone else does, but there's something about a custom-milled, semicircular beaded profile that looks crisper and more beautiful than anything you'll find on store shelves. It also costs substantially less than factory-milled options.

Start by deciding how tall you want your wainscot to be; 36" is best in rooms with 8' ceilings; 42" installations are ideal under 9' or 10' ceilings. Trim your tongue-and-groove lumber to length then sand the face of each piece with a 120-grit disc in a random orbit sander to remove mill marks. Be sure to use an especially light touch if you'll be staining your wood dark. Too much hand pressure on the sander creates swirl marks that look worse after staining.

Next, use a 1/4" or 3/8" diameter bearing guided half round bit in a table-mounted router with a fence to create the all-important edge beading. Adjust the height of the bit so the profile is cut just above the tongue as the wood travels over the router table on its edge.

You'll find featherboards helpful for holding the wood solidly against the fence as it's milled. Be sure to rout at least a few more boards than you need, just in case you ruin a few later. Pre-finishing your wainscot parts before installation makes the most sense, but not yet.

Now it's time to rout your top molding and baseboard. You've got options here, and one of the best is also one of the simplest. A 3/4" thick bullnose top cap sitting on top of 1" wide cove molding is a traditional cottage favorite. You'll find 6" or 7" wide baseboard topped with 1/2" thick bullnose completes the design nicely.

Pre-finish all wainscot parts (dark stain looks great), then get ready for installation. Most existing stud frame walls don't include horizontal blocking to hold nails, but that's okay. Use 2 1/2" long finishing nails to secure the top and bottom ends of each piece of beadboard into studs wherever you can. Be sure to locate nails where they'll be covered later by the top trim and baseboard. Use construction adhesive to glue those beadboards to the wall wherever they land between studs.

Mill your own wainscoting and it'll save you money, though that's not the only reason this approach makes sense. Quality, satisfaction and one-of-a-kind good looks are at least as important, and that's something you can't buy at any price.



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