

FIX IT UP!

Bruce Turner

Vive le Doors!

Not long ago, everything French seemed to be on the outs – remember Freedom Fries? – but the popularity of French doors just seems to keep increasing. French doors are swinging doors made mostly of glass, either one large double pane or smaller individual panes framed by wood. True French doors come in pairs, although many people apply the term to a single swinging glass door.

French doors have traditionally served as stylish replacements for sliding deck doors, and people love them because they let the indoors out and the outdoors in by allowing lovely light to pass through. But now they're appearing all over the house, adding that touch of class to the master bedroom, the bathroom, the kitchen and the dining room, allowing light to pass through spaces once darkened by solid doors. The newest popular feature is French doors that swing outward, so they don't take up additional floor space on the inside of the room. (They even make sliding doors today that are built to look just like French doors, with nice locksets and wide wood rails to frame the glass panel.)

Responding to the rising popularity of French doors, manufacturers have created lots of new styles. You can get them with a painted finish or natural wood, and with different sizes of glass panes, beveled or not, that are either removable for cleaning or fixed. Browse for what you like at a big-box home improvement store or a door specialty store.

The old scouting report on exterior French doors was that they leaked a lot and were easy pickings for burglars. Both criticisms are much less true than they used to be. The new door styles come with equally new weatherproofing systems that do a much better job of keeping the rain out. (That's important – we replace a lot of French doors that have been damaged by leaks.) And the new three-point locking systems secure the door with steel rods up through the head jamb, the top of the door frame, and down through the door sill.

So is installing a new set of French doors a do-it-yourself project? You bet, if you have the right tools and some experience. Your first task is to measure the door opening. Your second task is to measure it again. There's nothing more frustrating than realizing the beautiful door you ordered just doesn't quite fit the opening. As we say in the trade, it's better to measure twice and order once than measure once and order twice.

Once you've removed the existing doors, I recommend that before you position the new doors, you install a flashing pan under the threshold. A flashing pan is a clever little metal device that collects any windblown rainwater that runs under the door (or gets past the trim) and redirects it back outside.

Once you position the new door (it helps to have an extra pair of hands), you use small wooden wedges called shims to hold it in place. Make sure the door is plumb and level (if it's not, the door will swing by itself), and check your diagonals – the diagonal measurement from the top right to the bottom left should be exactly the same as the diagonal from the top left to the bottom right. When you're sure, use long enough screws to anchor under the hinges and then use finishing nails to secure the doorjamb. Trim the interior and exterior and you have the charm and beauty that will likely boost the value of your home.

And your final task? Smile and accept all the compliments on your beautiful new French doors.

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