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COVERING WALLS with FABRICS

Texas Agricultural Extension Service · The Texas A&M University System
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Covering Walls with Fabrics*

When tastefully applied, fabrics can achieve better decorative results than traditional wallpapers and vinyls. The depth of design and intermingling of colors and textures created with woven fabric is often impossible to duplicate. Depending on the fabric chosen and the way it is applied, fabric-covered walls improve the sound-absorbing acoustical properties of a room. Also, fabrics can be used for covering walls of either textured gypsum board or wood paneling. Home decorating magazines are good sources for ideas about fabric colors and patterns that can be used for wall coverings.

Fabric width ranges from 36-inch wide dress fabric to 102-inch wide king size sheets. Fewer seams have to be matched and a seamless wall may be created with the wider fabrics. Many import shops carry inexpensive, lightweight bedspreads in interesting designs suitable for walls.

Most retail outlets for wall coverings have one or more lines of fabric wall coverings with adhesive backing. To apply, peel off the paper and press the fabric on the wall. Felt, burlap, grasscloth and many other textures and weaves are available in this type of wall covering.

When selecting fabrics to apply to interior walls, consider pattern, color, amount of shrinkage and weight. Check to see if the design is printed with the grain of the fabric. On an all-over print that will not require matching, this probably is not too important. Designs printed off-grain will cause problems if they require careful matching.

The fabric should be colorfast to eliminate problems with streaking or fading. This is especially important in areas that receive intensive sunlight.

Purchase a "preshrunk" fabric so that you will not have to contend with an unstable fabric that bags and draws up. Fabric can be preshrunk by running through the warm water cycle on the washing machine.

The appropriate weight of fabric is important for successful installation. Choose a fabric appropriate in weight for the decorative effect to be achieved. Lightweight sheers and gauzy fabrics give a soft, feminine look if applied with fullness, but create entirely different results when glued or stretched taut over a wall. Thin, lightweight, solid color fabrics require a more blemish-free surface when glued than do heavy, rough textures and printed fabrics.

Determining the Amount of Fabric Needed

Whether using sheets or yard goods, use the following steps to find the correct amount of fabric needed to cover the selected area:

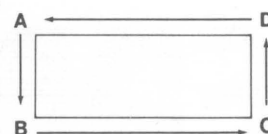
Step 1. Add the corner-to-corner measurements of the walls to be covered.

A to B _____ inches

B to C _____ inches

C to D _____ inches

D to A _____ inches



_____ Total inches of wall widths

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Step 2. Divide total inches needed by the usable width of the fabric in inches. The usable width does not include fabric necessary for design matching and selvages. This answer is the total number of panels needed. Add an extra panel if the number is uneven.

$$\frac{\text{Total inches}}{\text{Usable fabric width}} = \text{Panels}$$

Step 3. (A) If matching a design, measure from the top of the area to be covered to the bottom; usually this will be from ceiling to baseboard. (B) Measure the distance between the vertical length of one design repeat. (C) Add 3 inches to the length of each panel for handling ease:

(A) _____ vertical length of panel in inches

(B) _____ inches between one vertical design repeat

(C) 3" added for handling ease

_____ Total panel length in inches

Step 4. Convert panel lengths to yards by multiplying panel length times the number of panels to determine the total inches needed. Therefore, the answer from Step 3 times the answer from Step 2 equals the total inches needed.

$$\text{_____ inches (Total panel length)} \times \text{_____ panels} = \text{_____ Total inches}$$

Step 5. Divide the total inches needed (Step 4) by fabric width to determine the yards of fabric needed.

$$\frac{\text{Total inches}}{\text{Fabric width}} = \text{Yards needed}$$

Application Methods

There are several methods of applying fabrics to walls:

Permanent Methods

- Adhesive paste or glue

Temporary Methods

- Shirring
- Double-stick tape
- Fabric closure tape
- Staple, tack or nail
- Starch

Permanent Application

Fabrics are permanently installed by gluing them directly to the wall surface. This method usually requires considerable time since it is often necessary to prepare the surface before the fabric is attached.

Preparing Surfaces

Scrape and sand any areas of peeling paint or plaster. Remove thick layers of old wallpaper that have started to buckle or peel. Pull off any old vinyl wall covering, and go over glossy enamel paint with medium sandpaper, a trisodium phosphate and water solution, or a liquid sanding preparation. This step gives the glue a dull surface to adhere to.

Fill any gouges or nail holes with patching plaster and sand smooth after they have dried thoroughly. Minor ripples can be covered with spackling compound, a plaster-like substance that is spread thinly on the wall with a flexible putty knife.

Remove cover plates from wall switches and plugs. Glue matching fabric to these before replacing (see Figure 1).

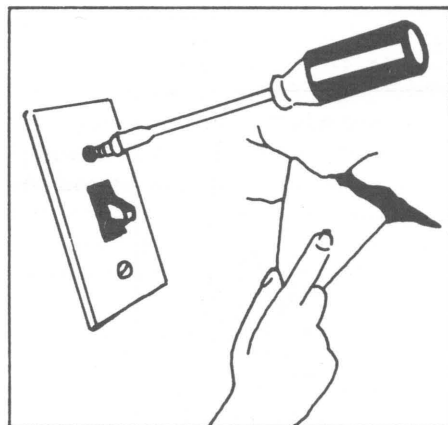


Figure 1

Walls that have been painted with a dull-type finish need only to be washed and rinsed with a damp sponge. A new wall, especially dry-wall construction, should have a coat of oil-based primer before fabric is glued to it. Applying fabric with glue over a "dry-wall" that has never been painted will make it almost impossible to remove the fabric later without ruining the wall surface.

Coat of Sizing

The last step prior to attaching the fabric is to apply a coat of sizing. Sizing is applied like paint, with either a roller or brush. It is really a glue that provides a good gripping surface and enables you to move the fabric around to correct minor alignment mistakes.

Gluing Fabrics

The glue, cellulose or wheatpaste must be mixed to the right consistency for the fabric chosen. Heavy fabrics require glue the consistency of cream. Lightweight fabrics, such as broadcloth and muslin, require glue the consistency of milk.

Apply glue with a brush to one width of fabric at a time, going 1 inch past the measured width. Usually, glue applications are more successful if done during dry weather and in a well-ventilated room.

Cut each panel 3 inches longer than the ceiling height. Match and cut sufficient fabric widths to cover completely one wall at a time.

Start with Corner

Install the first fabric panel so that it goes around a corner. Use a plumb line to start so the material will be straight even if the ceiling or corner is uneven (see Figure 2). Apply the glue or paste to the wall area to be covered. Equally divide the extra 3 inches of fabric length between the top and bottom of the wall.

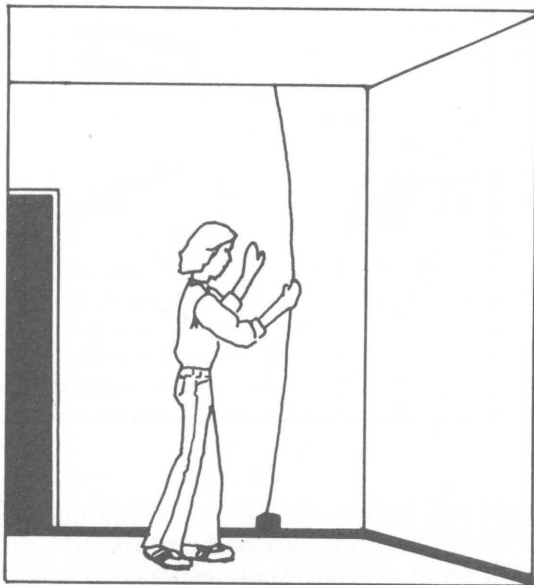


Figure 2

The second width of fabric should overlap the first by at least 2 inches or as needed for repeat matching (see Figure 3).

Smooth strips with a flat brush until fabric lies evenly. Let the fabric dry at least one hour before proceeding.

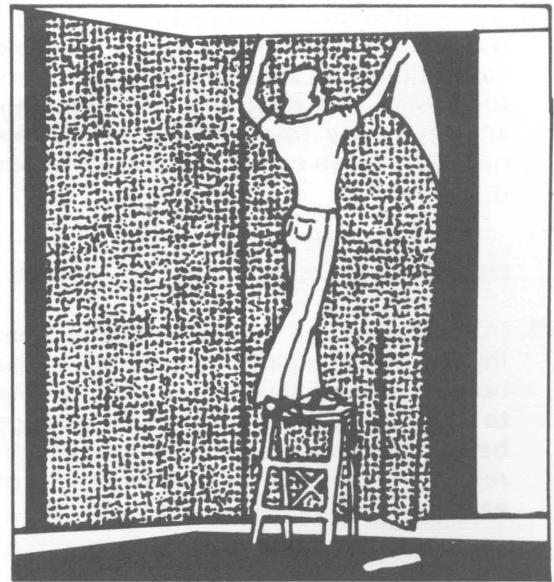


Figure 3

How to Butt Seams

Overlapped fabric will not adhere well to itself, so seams must be butted and selvages removed. Using a metal straight edge as a guide and a razor blade for cutting, start cutting 1 inch from the edge of the fabric at the overlapped area. Be sure the razor blade moves exactly parallel to the metal straight edge rather than a slight angle. Cutting at even the slightest angle will cause the underlayer to be cut narrower or wider than the top layer, and then the two layers will not butt, as shown in Figure 4.



Figure 4

Cut through both layers of fabric so that the strip from the top layer falls to the floor and the strip from the underlayment can be pulled away easily. If necessary, apply more glue, press edges of fabric together and smooth with brush. Clip any loose threads. Do not unravel the edges.

Use a metal straight edge and razor to trim excess fabric from bottom and top if necessary. To prevent fabric from puckering during cutting, run the razor lightly several times over a 12-inch length until fabric is cut through and can be pulled away easily (see Figure 5).

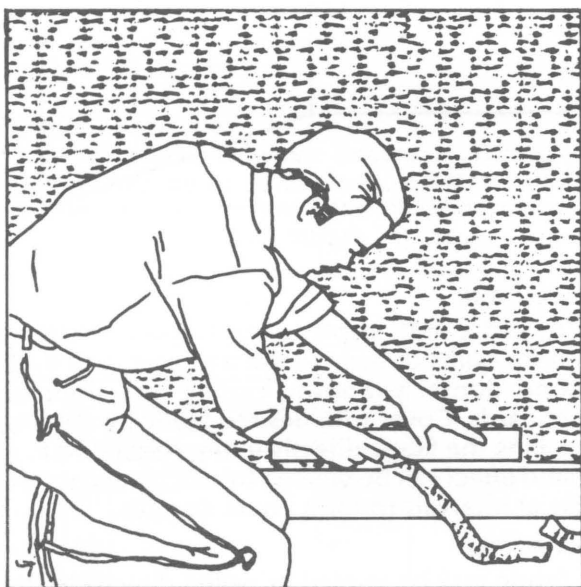


Figure 5

To cover raw edges at top or bottom when there is no molding, attach an attractive gimp, flat braid or decorative molding that either matches or contrasts with the wall fabric.

Temporary Application

Little or no surface preparation is necessary for temporary fabric application. Walls in poor condition can be covered easily by attaching fabric with staples or other non-permanent fasteners.

To prepare fabric for any of the temporary installation methods discussed, begin by matching the fabric pattern and cutting the material into lengths. Clip or remove the selvage to prevent puckers. Bring right sides of the fabric together and stick together, matching as needed. Press seams open. Fabric will be slightly uneven at top and bottom because of adjustments made in matching the fabric design, but the fabric will be trimmed later (see Figure 6).

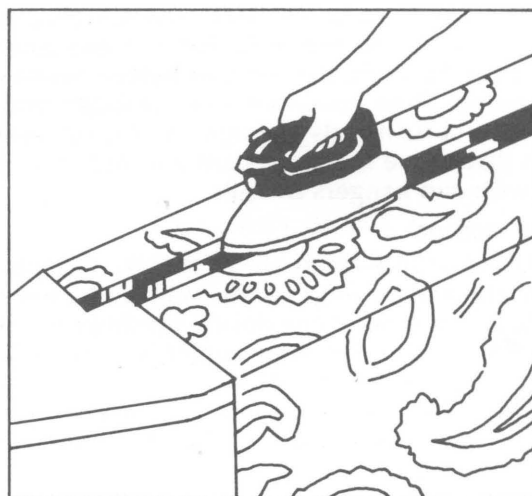


Figure 6

Shirring Method

Cut single lengths of fabric, allowing enough fabric at the top and bottom for a casing or gathered hem. Make a $\frac{1}{4}$ -inch hem on both sides of each panel or use selvages.

Use fabric panels equal to 2 times the wall width for medium weight fabrics and $2\frac{1}{2}$ to 3 times the wall width for light weight fabrics.

For windows and doors, make separate panels to be hung above and below them.

Attach shirring tape or gather panels at the top and bottom. Staple or nail the gathered fabric all the way across the top at the ceiling, then at the bottom above the baseboard (see Figure 7).



Figure 7

Slightly overlap panels in corners. Slit the fabric at electrical outlets and finish by hand with a buttonhole stitch.



The fabric can be attached with dowel rods or nailed directly to the wall. For rod attachment, run a casing along the top and bottom widths of the fabric. Then, insert cut-to-fit wooden dowels or small curtain rods through the casing. Fasten rods just above the baseboard and near the ceiling with cup hangers or nails.

Tape Method

Using double-faced carpet or masking tape, attach tape around edges of the wall, at the top and bottom and around any doors, windows or other openings. Also, place tape vertically on walls from ceiling to floor approximately every 12-16 inches. First, apply the prepared fabric along the top and work toward the bottom so that the grain of the fabric is kept vertical.

*Fabric Closure Tape**

This method is similar to the tape method except that a fabric closure tape is stitched along the top and bottom edges of the fabric as well as attached to the top and bottom of the walls. Although more expensive than the other methods, this method allows easy removal of fabric panels for cleaning and rehangings.

Stapling or Nailing Method

Fabrics may be stapled, tacked or nailed directly to the wall or they may be attached to lathing strips which have been nailed horizontally to the top and bottom of the wall. If using nails, select 1/2-inch wire nails.

Tacking or Nailing Reusable Sheets

Decorative bed sheets can be nailed or tacked to walls and easily removed without damaging either walls or fabric. The sheet is attached by using 1/2- to 3/4-inch wire nails or thumb tacks every 1 to 3 inches.

Place the small hem near the ceiling and begin nailing across the top at the plumbed edge for approximately 3 feet. Then pull the sheet taut, fold under the bottom edge and nail across the bottom above the baseboard for approximately 3 feet.

Repeat this procedure until the entire sheet is in place. Leave the bottom free 1 foot on each side of electrical or telephone outlets. No cutting is necessary to use the plugs.

Seams may be overlapped by folding selvages under and nailing where needed. To remove wire nails without damage to fabric, exert equal pull on both sides of nail head.

A king size sheet can be used to create a canopy effect. Begin by nailing the wide hem at the top of the baseboard. Approximately 6 feet

from the floor, nail braid trim, piping or flat decorative molding across the wall. Use a level to be sure the trim is straight. Angle the remaining fabric and attach to the ceiling. Additional trim may be used at the end of the hem (see Figure 8).

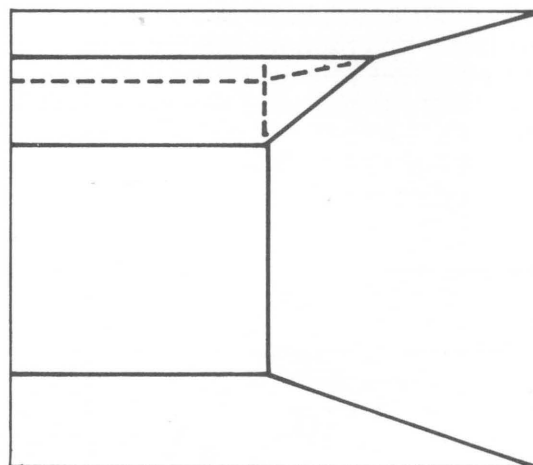


Figure 8

Padded Wall

To pad a wall, staple up to 3 layers of batting used for quilts directly to the wall area. Cut to fit around doors, windows, ceiling and floor or baseboards. Cover with desired fabric by stapling or nailing the fabric directly to the padded wall. A quilted effect can be created by nailing decorative tacks at intervals to form "quilt squares."

Backtacking

Fabric may be stapled or nailed directly to the wall by backtacking to conceal the staples or nails. Cut the panels the desired length plus 3 inches. Match the pattern as each panel is cut, allowing for a 1-inch "lapped seam." Establish a plumb line.

Start at the top. Use push pins to hold fabric. Staple every 2 to 3 inches close to the edge at the top. Staple at bottom, keeping fabric taut and smooth. Do not overstretch. Then, staple both sides.

Continue covering the area by overlapping each succeeding panel and stapling. Cut off excess at ceiling and floor with a sharp razor blade and metal edge ruler as a guide (see Figure 9).

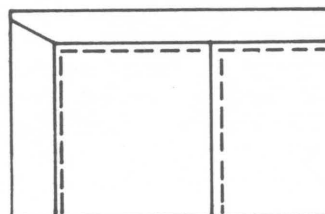


Figure 9

*Brand names of fabric closure tapes include Velcro, Flexloc and Scotchmate.

To conceal seams, attach the first panel directly to the wall according to the previous directions. The second panel is positioned face down on the first panel (see Figure 10).

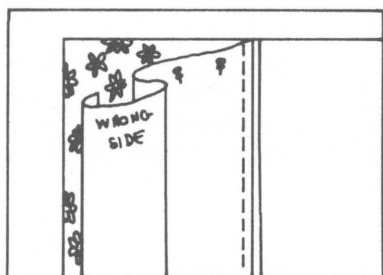


Figure 10

Match patterns when necessary. Using upholsterer's tape or continuous, perfectly straight cardboard strips on the seam, staple the second panel to the first (see Figure 11). Then, pull the panel to the wall and staple in place (see Figure 12).

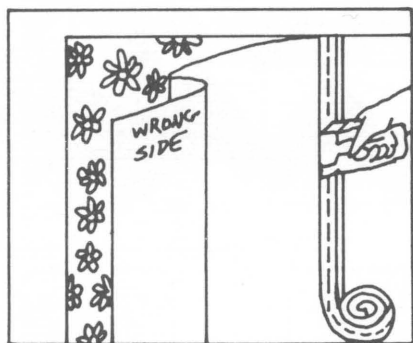


Figure 11

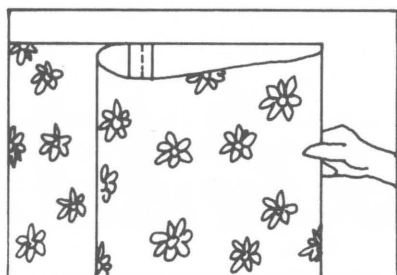


Figure 12

Continue to backtack and staple around the room. Fold the last panel over the tacking strip and fasten in place with $\frac{3}{4}$ -inch wide brads (see Figures 13 and 14). To cover, lift some threads over the brads (see Figure 15).

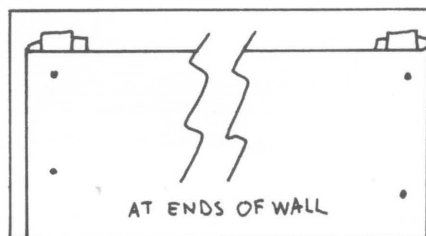


Figure 13

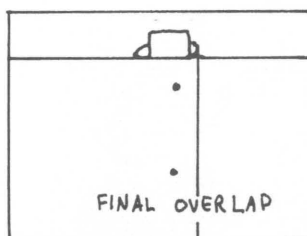


Figure 14

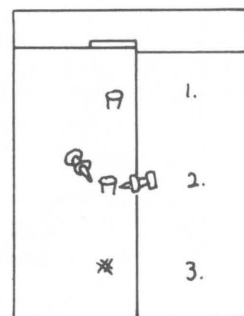


Figure 15

Stapling to Lath Strips

When fabrics are stapled to their original widths, vertical wooden lathing strips, $\frac{1}{2} \times 1$ inch or larger, should be attached to the wall where seams fall. Lath strips help conceal rough or uneven walls and make it possible to staple to plaster or concrete. Snap a plumb line to assure that strips are vertical. Position fabric and staple or nail as needed across the top, down the lathing strips and across the bottom, being careful to pull fabric evenly taut (see Figure 16).



Figure 16

Once stapled into position, trim edges of the fabric at the top and bottom. Clip threads; do not pull them. A decorative molding strip, gimp or braid may be attached across the top and bottom to conceal edges and give a professional look (see Figure 17).



Figure 17

Starch Method

This method is similar to using an adhesive, except it is a temporary application. Wash the wall to remove soil or greasy film. Cut the fabric the desired length plus 1 inch on the top and bottom. Be sure to match the design before cutting each panel.

Pour full-strength liquid starch into a bucket. It does not matter if the starch is colored. Saturate a sponge with the starch and apply liberally to the wall, starting at the top. Smooth the fabric into place along a plumb line, leaving about 1 inch to be trimmed later. Pin or tack fabric temporarily as you work down the panel, adding starch underneath by lifting the panel when needed.

Apply starch on top of the fabric, brushing and smoothing the fabric to remove bubbles and wrinkles. Be sure the starch penetrates the fabric evenly. This step creates a smooth application and soil resistant finish.

When completely dry, trim the fabric at the ceiling, floor, doors and windows. If there are bubbles in the fabric after it has dried, soak them with starch and smooth them out.

To remove the fabric, begin in one corner and gently peel off the panel. If the panel is holding snugly, moisten it with a damp sponge and continue to peel it loose. Fabric can be reused after washing.

Protective Finishes

Fabric-covered walls can be made more resistant to water and grease stains if fabric protected by a stain-repellent finish is purchased. Generally, fabrics treated with such finishes cost slightly more than untreated fabrics.

To add protection to an untreated fabric, soil-repellent finishes may be purchased in aerosol spray form and applied directly to the fabric after it has been attached to the wall. Application of the spray-on finish will not alter the appearance of the fabric.

For walls that are subjected to unusually heavy soiling, a stronger protective finish can be obtained by applying a coat of clear polyurethane, varnish or shellac to the wall fabric after it is in place (see Figure 18).



Figure 18

References

- Lewis, Alfred Allan. *Decorating With Fabric*. New York: Grossett and Dunlap, 1974.
- Lindahl, Judy. *Decorating With Fabric: An Idea Book*. Portland, Oregon, 1975.
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