

SUNDAY, MAY 20, 2001 • SECTION G

Panel discussion

Paint or wallpaper can transform paneled walls from dark, dated and depressing to light, bright and cheery

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EITHER ALMOST any ranch house that sprang up in the 1950s and '60s and you'll see it: Dark paneling.

It covers the walls in the long family room — a room usually brightened only by a small window or two.

"There are not enough windows, and (the rooms are) dark anyway. They're horrid, depressing," said designer Tiffany Sowards of Decorating Den Interiors in Irmo.

"They're dated," said interior designer Laurin Johnson of Laurin Johnson Interiors.

But they don't have to stay that way.

Wallpapering or painting the room, particularly with a faux finish, are options for opening and brightening it.

Designer Bonnie Younginer of Lynn Cobb Interiors said she's worked in several houses where owners wanted to do something to change the dark paneling.

"Particularly now, younger people are buying older ranch houses," Younginer said. "They want to bring them up to date and have them look young and fresh."

Tearing out the paneling usually isn't the best option, often because you'll find a wall underneath that needs a lot of work.

For painting, designers recommend using textured paint or putting a faux finish on the wall.

Johnson said she once worked on a home where the owners gutted their kitchen and renovated it, installing new pickled cabinets. The new kitchen opened to the den, which was a dark, paneled room.

"To connect the look, we left the panel-

ing and pickled it," matching the look on the kitchen cabinets.

"It was one of the prettiest ones we've done," Johnson said.

Sowards, too, is a big believer in faux finishing paneled walls.

"If you paint it flat, it looks like painted paneling," she said.

She suggests putting a primer coat on first. Then choosing three shades of the same color. She puts the darkest color on first. After that's dry, she mixes half of the dark shade with one that is lighter. Finally, she mixes it with the third, and lightest, shade of the color.

She applies it with plastic grocery bags around all window and door casings and along crown molding where it meets the paneling.

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SOME TIPS

Here are some things to keep in mind before you paint your paneling.

■ **Clean it.** Scrub the paneling using a large sponge and a mixture of detergent and ammonia to remove any dirt buildup. Rinse thoroughly and let the paneling dry.

■ **Caulk it.** If you decide to fill the paneling seams and holes, do it before you apply the primer. Filling the seams with spackle is time consuming and not always necessary. If you decide to fill them in, use lightweight spackle and caulk.

You should caulk along the top of the baseboards, along the edge of the crown molding where it meets the paneling, around all window and door casings and along

corner molding, if you have it.

■ **Prime it.** Apply primer, whether you plan to paint or wallpaper the room. Make sure all the panels are coated evenly with primer. Let the primer dry overnight.

■ **Paint it.** Once the primer is dry, the panels can be painted. Use a quality latex paint to ensure that it adheres to the surface well. You will probably need two or more coats to cover dark paneling completely. You can paint it with a brush and roller, or faux finish it using plastic bags, rags, sponges or other tools.

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to give it an interesting look. "Faux finishing can hide the imperfections," Sowards said. "It looks like it has texture, so you can hide anything."

Sowards also suggests painting the ceiling a lighter shade of the color of the walls to bring the room together.

"When I lived in England, everybody's ceiling was painted," she said. "You'd think it would bring the ceiling down, but it doesn't. But a lot of people don't have the guts to do it."

Johnson said she often suggests using wallpaper over paneling. She recommends using a liner paper to go underneath the wallpaper.

Liner paper can be used over rough walls such as cinder block or paneling to provide a smooth surface for wallpaper.

The liner hides the grooves, although some spackling may be necessary to fill deep grooves. It's available in several weights, from light to very heavy.

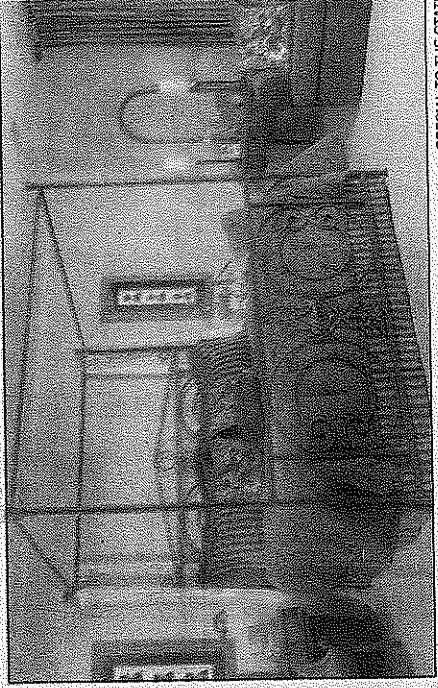
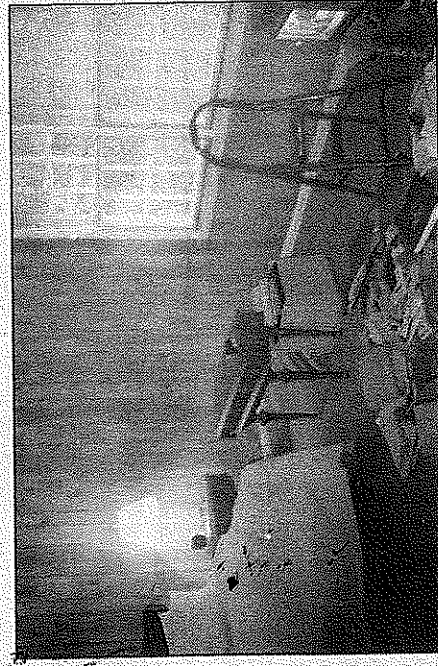
Also available are "embossed papers," which come in patterns like an old tin ceiling or stucco. They can then be painted any color.

The goal is to brighten the room.

"Paint it light and add lighting," Younginer said. "It's really hard when you have a room that size and no natural light. It's a large room, but not really big enough to divide it into two seating areas."

You can always add windows or French doors to the outside, but that's a major — and expensive — renovation if a unlimited budget isn't in your plans, consider paint.

"It's so inexpensive for the look you get," Soward said. "It brightens it up and makes people feel happier."



SPECIAL TO THE STATE

Interior designer Tiffany Sowards of Irmo applied a faux finish paint over paneled walls to revamp this bedroom.