

# Eco-Experts



Kurt Buss



David Eisenberg



Debra Lynn Dadd

## Answers to your questions

### Reusing Cabinets

*I'm planning to renovate my kitchen, and I asked three potential contractors about saving the cabinets for donation or sale to a person or organization who might need them for a basement or garage workshop. Two acted as if that would be feasible; the third said they'd be impossible to remove in reusable condition. Exactly how hard is it to remove cabinets?*

—ANN CARPER, WASHINGTON D.C.

#### **Kurt Buss replies:**

Cabinet removal is not difficult at all, although there can be some complications if the cabinets are built into the wall as opposed to premanufactured boxes. You can easily distinguish between the two by opening the doors and looking inside. If the back of the cabinet is the same material as the rest of the cabinet, you're most likely looking at a premanufactured cabinet box that's held to the wall by a half-dozen or fewer screws in the wall studs. If the back of the cabinet is the same material as your wall covering (usually sheetrock in newer homes and plaster in older homes), the cabinets have been built into the space and won't be as easily removed.

Generally, when judging cabinets as reuse candidates, we look at several things: ease of removal, quality of construction, and type of material used. Built-in cabinets are more difficult because they incorporate the wall as

part of the cabinet. However, the cabinet faces (doors) may be worth saving if they're solid wood or glass. They could be fitted onto other cabinet boxes or used in the manufacture of new furniture pieces. Craftsman-style bungalows often have built-in cabinets made of solid wood and glass and are often worth the extra effort to dismantle.

Many cabinet boxes have solid wood faces, but the boxes are thin pieces of particleboard with plastic corner braces that fall apart easily. Older cabinet boxes constructed of thicker plywood and steel or wood corner braces are much more durable. The adage "they don't build things like they used to" often comes to mind when dismantling buildings.

*KURT BUSS is program manager for ReSource, a building material reuse and deconstruction program of the Center for ReSource Conservation in Boulder, Colorado (Resource2K.org). He also serves as co-chair of the Board of Directors for the Used Building Material Association (UBMA.org).*

### Termite Control

*I've been considering building a log home but wonder about using chemically treated wood, which protects the home from termites and other pests. How can I have a healthy home and avoid termites?*

—PATRICIA ROSHAVEN, VIA EMAIL

#### **David Eisenberg replies:**

Wood is both an excellent and problematic building material. Because it's biodegradable, insects, fungi, and bacteria eat it. Wood preservatives, which

are designed to kill these organisms, raise environmental and human health concerns. Balancing concerns about termites, carpenter ants, bees, wood borers, and the effects of moisture with concerns about the toxicity of preservative treatments is a longstanding challenge. It's best to do some research and make choices based on your situation, needs, and personal preferences.

That said, here are some things to consider. Log cabins, like all wood structures, are susceptible to insect infestation and deterioration related to moisture. One way to eliminate or reduce the use of treated wood is to substitute other materials where wood is most vulnerable to these problems, especially at the base of the building. Another way is to design the structure with proper overhangs, gutters, flashing, and detailing to keep wood dry, thereby minimizing rot.

Building codes require that any wood in contact with concrete foundations or the ground be pressure treated or made of naturally decay-resistant species. Wood used elsewhere may not need to be treated with toxic chemicals if it's protected from weather and moisture. Some log cabin builders routinely treat all logs, so if you aren't building yourself, ask about chemicals being used.

Other eco-friendly options include barrier methods (termite shields, stainless steel mesh, sand barriers, diatomaceous earth), the use of naturally decay- and insect-resistant