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Popular Poplar

Sturdy bark siding becomes a stylish home accessory

Marty and Chris McCurry are the least likely people to be labeled stuffy elitists. The North Carolina natives love the outdoors and spend a good deal of time working with their hands. However, when it comes to mountain architecture, the owners of Highland Craftsmen have a definite vision of how things should be.

"I've always been connected to nature and I've got the mountains in my blood," says Chris. "We need to harmonize with nature and minimize the visual impact of construction here."

Each year, some 6,000 visitors flock to Blowing Rock, a pristine mountain town just north of Grandfather Mountain, the highest peak in the Blue Ridge chain. In addition to being the state's oldest tourist attraction, Blowing Rock's cooler temperatures and exquisite landscapes have also made it a popular place for vacation and second homes.

The McCurrys were pleased by the town's increased popularity but troubled by the fact that builders paid such little attention to aesthetics. Vacation homes routinely went up with designs and products not complementary to the natural environment. The McCurrys set a tough task for themselves: curbing the proliferation of mountain homes that looked like anything but. They looked for ways to blend architecture, art and the environment into a suitable design and offer builders and homeowners an attractive alternative to brick and stucco.

"Poplar bark siding is great," says Chris. "It creates a true natural look, and lends a distinctive character to the blended modern rustic mountain home."

For the first three years, convincing discerning homeowners to use bark was a tough sell. However, after they completed a few projects, builders and designers began seeking them out. In the last decade, Highland Craftsmen has worked with architects and builders to complete more than 100 buildings featuring poplar bark siding.

"Nothing else looks as rich or rustic," says Joe Todd of Todd Brothers Construction. "Bark siding gives a look that can't be duplicated with any other material."



Poplar bark siding adds approximately 15 to 20 percent to the cost of a home with wood siding, but builders and homeowners say it's worth the price. Bark shingles require very little time or cost to maintain, resist infestations and, because they are kiln dried, they resist shrinking or cracking once in place.

"The additional cost is often recouped in the first 10 years of owning the home," says Marty.

"The great thing is that these houses blend into their surroundings," adds Chris. "They look like they belong here, like they grew out of the ground. I think it helps to tie people to the land." —Melba Newsome

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