



# *Cabinet Painting 101*

EVERYTHING YOU NEED TO START YOUR  
PROJECT AND FINISH IT SUCCESSFULLY

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# INTRODUCTION

This is it, right? This is why you're here.

You want to paint your cabinets, but you don't know what kind of paint, primer, and tools to use. The possibilities seem endless, and if you pick the wrong one, you could end up with a mess on your hands and so many hours wasted on an unsuccessful project.

Don't worry, you've come to the right place, and I'm not going to let that happen.

I'll show you what supplies you need based on the type of material you're painting, which method works best for busy families, and answer all the most frequently asked questions I hear from readers.

And finally, I've included a couple of helpful worksheets to get you started in the right direction.

But first, where is all this coming from, and why should you listen to anything I have to say?

## How I Became a DIY Cabinet Painting Expert

This was never the plan for my life, but somehow along the way, I've become something of a reluctant expert at painting cabinets.

In my escapades with flipping houses, and remodeling my own houses, I've painted kitchen cabinets, bathroom cabinets, RV cabinets, and file cabinets, not to mention dressers, chairs and tables.

They've been wood, laminate, stained, and unfinished, Oak, Maple, brand new, 40 years old, and everything in between.

With each project I've learned a few things, which I've shared in blog posts along the way. Here are those posts, in case you'd like more details of each project:

- [The Best Way to Paint Kitchen Cabinets](#)
- [Painted Kitchen Cabinets – How They're Holding Up](#)
- [The Original Kitchen Cabinets Post](#)
- [Painted Bathroom Cabinets](#)
- [How to Paint Laminate Cabinets](#)

I've answered a few hundred questions along the way and I thought it would just be easier to wrap everything up in one place, like this book.

I love helping people with their projects, and if my experience can help you, then it makes it all worthwhile!

So let's dive right in, shall we?

# THE PRODUCTS & TOOLS

Here are three best-practice options for cabinet painting products, ranked in order of my favorite to least favorite (but still useful) options, along with why I recommend each one.

I've included specific options for painting laminate cabinets, in case you're dealing with cabinets or furniture that aren't real wood.

Finally, I've made up a list of other supplies you'll need, along with a handy supply checklist worksheet.

## OPTION 1: VALSPAR OR BEHR CABINET AND FURNITURE ENAMEL

Valspar (at Lowe's) and Behr (at Home Depot) both make a good cabinet and furniture enamel, similar to the concept of the Satin Enamels which we'll talk about in a minute in option 2.

These paints require no sanding and very little prep. With the exception of giving your cabinets a good cleaning/degreasing first, you can basically slap this paint on and get going.

And as with all the options listed here, these cabinet enamels don't require a top coat.

These enamels tend to be a little thinner consistency than other paints, which can result in paint drips if you're not careful as you apply the paint. But as long as you apply the paint somewhat lightly, your finish will turn out great. You may need two or three coats, which is true of all the paint options.

The great thing about these cabinet enamels is you can have them mixed in any color you choose. The Valspar paint is also available in both Satin and Semi-gloss finish, which is nice.

It's like Valspar and Behr heard our pleas and decided to answer with exactly the product we needed to transform our cabinets easily and quickly, with a smooth, durable finish that will stand the test of time.

Thank you Valspar and Behr!

## PROS & CONS OF OPTION 1 (CABINET ENAMEL)

**Pros:** You can find this paint at either Lowes or Home Depot and get in it in almost any color you want. Durable and easy to prep. No sanding, primer or top coat necessary.

**Cons:** The consistency is a little thinner, so you need to be careful when applying to avoid drips.

## OPTION 2: DECOART SATIN ENAMELS

Oh Satin Enamels, how do I love thee? Let me count the ways.

You don't drip or smudge. You don't need sanding or priming. You don't need a top coat. I can basically just slap you on and stand back and admire my handiwork. And nothing seems to stick to or stain your slick surface.

This is the product I used on my [Best Way to Paint Kitchen Cabinets \(No Sanding!\)](#) project. I loved the easy process and the durable finished product, and I still do.

If you can get your hands on DecoArt products, this has been my favorite product for cabinet painting projects for a long time and I still recommend it.

I used to buy them at craft stores like Hobby Lobby or Michaels, and they were always available on Amazon. But lately, they've been hard to find. DecoArt assures me that their paint is still available directly through their website, but I've heard that some colors are not listed anymore.

That's why I've bumped them from my first option, to a very close second choice.

#### PROS & CONS OF OPTION 2 (SATIN ENAMELS)

**Pros:** very easy to use and apply. Strong durable finish. No sanding, very little prep, no primer and no top coat needed.

**Cons:** Can be hard to get the products. Limited color selection.

### OPTION 3: ALKYD PAINT, PRIMER, AND SANDING

“Alkyd” paint is basically an oil paint suspended in a water base. That makes application and clean up easier, but gives you the durability of oil paint. Benjamin Moore and Sherwin Williams both make a great Alkyd product.

This option is perfectly acceptable, and indeed for many years was the “correct” way to paint cabinets. It's the product I used on my first kitchen cabinet painting project, after much research. Years later, it has stood the test of time.

However, it's the most labor intensive method, and requires sanding, which really makes a mess in your kitchen. If you want to go old school and get the satisfaction of knowing you've given your project every possible chance of success, you can't go wrong with sanding, priming, and finishing with Alkyd paint.

I personally believe that, while absolutely correct, this way of painting cabinets causes the most upheaval on your household and family, so it's not the way I'd do it again.

### PROS & CONS OF OPTION 3 (ALKYD PAINT)

**Pros:** Can be mixed in any color. Easily available at Benjamin Moore and Sherwin Williams. Beautiful and durable finish.

**Cons:** Takes a long time to dry between coats. Requires sanding and primer.

## PRODUCTS FOR LAMINATE CABINET PAINTING

This book would not be complete without touching on the subject of laminate cabinets. Because laminate is non-porous, the paint will have a hard time adhering unless you use a base coat first.

These are my two recommended options for painting any sort of non-wood cabinet or furniture:

### Laminate Option 1: CHALK PAINT PRIMER AND SATIN ENAMELS

This used to be my favorite method for painting laminate, and the method I used on my camper's laminate cabinets. You can use any type of chalk paint, and then seal it with DecoArt Satin Enamel, which I covered in Option 2 above.

But alas, as I mentioned, the products can be hard to find. So the next option is my new favorite for laminate.

## Laminate Option 2: ZINSSER BIN PRIMER AND VALSPAR CABINET/FURNITURE ENAMEL

If you've never used Zinsser BIN primer before, let me introduce you to a game changer. This stuff is THE BEST for covering stains or knot holes and adhering paint to slippery surfaces.

I would use it on everything, except that it's overkill for most projects. It's a shellac based product, which makes it the perfect bridge between paint and surface. But it's also stinky, and cleanup is difficult because it's not water based.

So maybe it's over the top for some things, but it does a great job of gluing paint to laminate. We used it on a cabinet at our latest flip house and it worked even better than chalk paint for adhering the enamel to the laminate. I've also used it for painting trim and baseboards in high-traffic areas.

This would be my #1 choice if it weren't for the fumes and more difficult cleanup. To solve those problems, just use adequate ventilation and plan on disposing of your rollers and brushes afterwards, rather than trying to wash them.

You could also use a combination of both these options by using chalk paint first as your primer, and Valspar Cabinet Enamel as your top coat. That way you don't get the fumes of the Zinsser primer, and you aren't tied down to the DecoArt products.

## THE REST OF THE CABINET PAINTING SUPPLIES

Once you've picked your paint and primer, you still need tools to apply them. Here are all the other supplies you'll need. (These are all the same, regardless of which type of paint you choose.)

- Krud Kutter – for cleaning before painting
- 4" Mohair Paint Roller and handle – for rolling paint on larger flat areas
- Soft Paintbrush – I like a 1" angle brush for details and edges
- 2" Painter's Tape – for taping off edges and for labeling doors
- Caulk – for filling seams between and around the edges of cabinets.

Be sure to check out the handy supply checklist at the end of this book, as well as the worksheet for figuring out how much paint you'll need. Or you could just make multiple trips to the hardware store, like I usually do.

## WHAT'S THE BOTTOM LINE ON PRODUCTS?

You bought this book to get straight to the heart of how to paint your cabinets, and what products you need, right? Well here it is, simplified:

I recommend Valspar or Behr Cabinet & Furniture Enamel for painting your wood cabinets. If you have laminate, I still recommend the same as a top coat, and add a base coat of chalk paint or Zinsser BIN primer.

Now you know what to use, read on for how to use it.

# THE METHOD

Finding the right painting products is only half the battle. Now you need to know what to do with them. Here's the method I use on ALLLL my cabinet painting projects to save time, space, and sanity.

**The secret?** Unless you are painting the insides of your cabinets (which I don't recommend) you don't need to move anything out of your kitchen! No sanding means no dust, which means all your dishes and food can stay in place, tucked away in their cabinets, and not spilling over into your whole house for the duration of your project.

Even if you complete your project a little at a time over several weekends (because this is real life), you can still cook every night. Not that you'd want to, but you could.

This means you can carry on with your life, even as your cabinet painting project rages on.

Here's how:

## 1. PREP

Even with the right products, the key to a good finish is in the preparation. None of my recommendations include sanding (yay!), but all of them include cleaning.

While I know you're itching to get started, painting over dust and grease is a recipe for peeling paint and frustration.

Do yourself a favor and clean every inch of your cabinets with Krud Kutter first. Simply spray on lightly and wipe off with a clean damp cloth or paper towel, being sure to get in all the crevices of the cabinet doors.

This is especially important in kitchens near the stove and sink.

I guarantee you'll be at least a little creeped out at all the grime that comes off your cabinets. Keep going until no more gray grease and dirt soils your rag or paper towel as you wipe off the Krud Kutter.

## 2. PAINT DOOR FRONTS

Once your cabinets are clean, you can paint the front of the cabinet doors. Use a roller for large areas, and a brush for smaller detailed spots like raised door frames.

**Pro Tip:** if your roller leaves spongy marks, you can lightly feather a dry soft brush over the wet paint to smooth them down. Follow a straight up and down pattern, along with the wood grain.

Don't worry about anything yet except the front of the doors. Work your way around to all the cabinet doors and drawer fronts before removing any of them.

## 3. LABEL & REMOVE DOORS

While the front of your cabinet doors are drying, label the inside of the doors and cabinets, using the raffle ticket method.

**Raffle ticket labels:** Make two pieces of tape with the same number on each. Stick one to the inside of the cabinet and one to the inside of the door (or drawer). When it's time to reattach your doors, you'll simply match up the numbers to get each door matched up to the right frame.

When your door fronts have dried to the touch, use a screwdriver to remove them, along with their hinges. Then remove any pulls or other hardware. Label and keep the hardware if you plan on reattaching it.

#### 4. PAINT CABINET FRAMES

Now that the doors and hinges are out of the way, you can paint your cabinet frames. Use the same process as you did to paint the doors - painting the edges and details with a small brush and the larger areas with a roller.

If your cabinet frames run up against the wall or appliances, first use blue painter's tape to mask off the edge so your paint doesn't end up where you don't want it.

#### 5. PAINT SIDES AND BACKS OF DOORS

While your frames are drying, you can paint the edges and backs of your cabinet doors. I like to spread a sheet or tarp on my kitchen table and do a door or two at a time.

Just be sure you have a place to dry them each without leaning them against each other or the new paint will stick.

**Drying trick:** Once the paint is dry to the touch, I lean them against a wall and use wax paper strips on the floor and tucked between doors, to keep them from sticking as they cure.

#### 6. FILL GAPS

If you find you have noticeable gaps on the frames or doors where two pieces of wood meet each other, fill these with a little caulk or wood filler, then paint. (You could do this as part of your "Prep" step, but I find the gaps are easier to see once you have at least a coat of paint on the wood.)

This may seem like a small detail, but it will give your whole project a really nice finished look.

## 7. REPLACE DOORS

After your doors and frames are good and dry (most paints will need a few days to really cure hard), you can replace them. You may want to use bumpers or wax paper strips on the doors to keep them from sticking to the frames, especially during the first few weeks.

## 8. UPDATE HARDWARE

This step is optional, but so much fun! Now is the time to update your drawer pulls and knobs. Check out my tutorial to [make attaching new cabinet hardware easier](#).

## WHAT ABOUT LAMINATE?

The process for painting laminate cabinets is exactly the same, just with the appropriate painting products, listed in the first chapter.

You'll also need to add a step for priming, right before the painting step.

**Primer Tip:** Primer always looks terrible. Don't worry about trying to make it look good or evenly painted. You just need a quick coat so your paint will have something to stick to. One coat will do it, and you shouldn't need more than a gallon (or even half) for a whole kitchen.

# FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

You can see all the comments and questions on my original cabinet painting articles by following the links in this book's introduction, but I've tried to distill them into the main questions here.

Hopefully this chapter will cover most of the questions that may be holding you up from getting started on your project.

## CAN I USE LATEX PAINT?

Well yes, you can use anything you want. But latex paint, as in regular wall paint, will not give you as smooth or durable a finish as enamel paint.

I'll admit that, in a pinch, I've painted cabinets and furniture with latex paint that I had on hand. Generally I've had good experience with Valspar Signature in Satin, but I wouldn't trust a whole kitchen remodel to it.

I've been much happier with the cabinets and furniture I've painted with the Satin Enamels and the Valspar Cabinet Enamel, specifically when it comes to a smooth, durable finish without brush strokes.

## CAN I SPRAY MY CABINETS?

Yes, you sure can! The difference is in the prep. With a sprayer, you'll need to remove all your doors and hardware first, and be sure to cover everything else to prevent overspray.

Some sprayers require you to thin the paint, but I know the HomeRight Finish Max is supposed to be great for chalk paint and I'd assume it would be for enamel paint as well.

I don't have a lot of experience with paint sprayers, but I know friends and other painters who swear by them. Personally, I like the control I get from a brush or roller. If you want to try a sprayer, I would suggest practicing first to get the hang of it before you tackle your whole kitchen.

## DO I NEED A PRIMER?

This is the big question – *what does primer actually do?*

Primer is good for 3 things: sealing natural wood so the paint goes on evenly, covering stains so they don't show through the paint, and creating a surface the paint will adhere to.

Ask yourself which of these categories fit your cabinets:

- If your surface is wood that's in good shape with any kind of previous finish on it, you don't need primer.
- If your surface is wood that is old and dry, or new and completely unfinished, you need primer.
- If your surface is laminate, you need primer.
- If your surface is made of wood with tannin stains showing through, you need primer.
- If you have any doubt and don't ever want to second guess whether you did things right, you need primer.

By primer, I mean either actual primer or chalk paint, as detailed in the product options above.

## NO SANDING? REALLY?

Really! Unless you choose product option 3 above, with the sanding, priming and Alkyd paint, you don't need to sand.

You might want to lightly sand if you can see or feel imperfections in the wood you're painting, but if your wood is in good shape, then get ready to throw on the paint!

## DO I NEED A TOP COAT?

No. None of these options need a top coat. In fact, they are all specially formulated for their durable finish.

I don't recommend a top coat at all, but if you just can't stand it, you can use Polycrylic. It won't yellow over time like polyurethane will.

## WHAT IF MY CABINETS ARE NOT IN GOOD SHAPE? WILL PAINTING OVER THEM FIX THAT?

If your cabinets are peeling, chipping, or flaking, that's a whole 'nother problem, and no magic combination of primer and paint is going to fix that.

(With the possible exception of [Peel-Stop](#), which I haven't tried but I've heard is formulated for just this problem. If you try it, let me know how it goes. I believe it's best for applications that don't require a smooth detailed finish, since I think you'd still see the edges of the peeling paint as texture under the new paint.)

Before you start even cleaning your cabinets to paint them, you'll need to scrape off any peeling paint and patch with wood-filler. Then you'll need

to sand them to a smooth finish and apply a primer over the wood filler. Then you can proceed with Step 1 of the method above.

## WILL THE PAINT CHIP OVER TIME?

OK, this is the tough one, and I'm going to be completely honest with you. The answer is yes, a little. And anyone who tells you differently is selling something.

Any paint job on any surface has the potential to chip over time with heavy wear and tear. Every product, method, and painting professional aims at reducing this problem to almost zero, but I'd be lying if I guaranteed your paint job would never chip.

I usually find that the cabinet housing the trash under the sink and the drawer holding the silverware are the first to show signs of love. So I keep a little jar of the paint I used on the project to touch up every year or so.

That's the simple truth, and the reason we don't **paint our countertops**, usually. Things that get a lot of beatings will eventually show their age. Hence the need for home maintenance.

Just like you clean your gutters, or empty your dryer vent, you'll occasionally need to attend to your paint job. But these methods will cut down on the need for that job significantly, if you do them right.

The best way you can avoid chipping paint is to thoroughly clean your cabinets before even touching them with paint. Spend a little time on prep, and you'll spend less time later on touch ups!

## MORE QUESTIONS?

I'd love to hear them! Simply click on one of the links in the introduction of this book. Those will take you to one of my original blog posts and you can leave me a comment. I always try to respond quickly, and I'm sure other DIYers could learn from your question.

Or you can simply email me at [meredith@thepalette.com](mailto:meredith@thepalette.com). I love to hear from you and I love to help with your projects. Well, you know, help with advice. I won't actually come to your house and paint your cabinets. (That's actually my #1 most frequently asked question!)

And finally, don't forget to print out the next two pages to make notes and keep track of what you'll need for your project. There's a handy supply checklist, and a worksheet for figuring out how much paint you'll need. Both will save you time and hopefully an extra trip (or two) to the store.

Best of luck with your project. You got this!

*Meredith*

## PAINT WORKSHEET

The first step in your painting project is to determine how much paint you'll need.

1. Use this space to make notes about the size of your project. Measure the length and width of your cabinets. Then multiply length x width to get the square footage. (You may want to do this in sections and add each section together.)

Length \_\_\_\_\_ x Width \_\_\_\_\_ = \_\_\_\_\_ Square Feet

2. Now divide your square footage (above) by the number of square feet your paint can says it will cover. Round up to a whole number. This is how many cans of paint you'll need per coat. To be safe, double the number to allow for two coats.

Coverage, as specified by manufacturer, listed on can: \_\_\_\_\_

Sq. Ft. \_\_\_\_\_ / Coverage \_\_\_\_\_ = \_\_\_\_\_ Cans needed per coat

Cans per coat \_\_\_\_\_ x 2 = \_\_\_\_\_

This is how many cans of paint you'll need for the whole project.

# PAINT SUPPLY CHECKLIST

No DIY job is complete without multiple trips to the hardware store! Use this handy checklist to make sure you have everything you need for your cabinet painting project and minimize your trips.

 Paint Type & Color: \_\_\_\_\_ # of Cans: \_\_\_\_\_

 Primer (if needed): \_\_\_\_\_ (1 gallon should do it)

 Krud Cutter and rags or paper towels

 4" Mohair roller and handle

 Soft paintbrush - 1" angled

 2" Painter's tape

 Caulk or Wood Filler

 \_\_\_\_\_