

## Selecting Outdoor Finishes



### What kinds of finishes will hold up best outdoors?

Many fired and non-fired finishes can be used safely outdoors. The combination of selecting the right finish, compatibility with the clay body, proper application and accurate firing practices all play a big role in durability factor. Also, keep in mind that these finishes need to stay protected and intact to retain a long life. If a piece cracks or get a chip, and moisture is allowed to enter the body, it will not matter what kind of finish you have selected. Moisture is the biggest culprit when it comes to problems with outdoor items. Repairing chips and making sure the surface is sufficiently sealed will keep your creations in tip-top shape.

### Fired Finishes

Fired finishes are often the most durable outdoors. You are not limited to just shiny finishes since some manufacturers have colour lines and techniques designed to mimic the look of stone or other matte finishes. A variety of traditional crystal glazes and gloss finishes are still available to complete many classic outdoor pieces. Underglazes and bisque glazes are idea for items where a lot of colour and detailing is required.

Remember that the interior and exterior need to be completely glazed. Do not skimp and try to take a shortcut by not glazing the interior. Moisture and debris can make its way into the bisque from the inside if it is not sealed. In fact, ceramic bisque is like a sponge just waiting to suck up dirt and moisture from the ground. This moisture and discoloration can make its way through the ware and appear under your exterior coating of glaze.

The interior of a piece is a great place to use up old glaze or colour that you have had sitting around for a while. If you cannot find a good place to use up the harvest gold or avocado green, this could be your opportunity. Who cares what color is on the inside? It is recommended to use colours from the same product family to avoid incompatibility problems that could cause finishes on one side to craze or get small cracks. Remember, those small cracks are openings for moisture to get in.

Make certain the interior and exterior are free of dust before applying a finish. It is also a good idea to dampen the areas (using a wet sponge) where colours will be placed. Thin the glaze for the interior with a small amount of water. Pour a generous amount inside the object and roll it around making certain to get glaze in every corner and crevice. If possible, place tape or a sponge over the pour hole so you can actually shake the piece to help ensure sufficient coverage. Allow excess glaze to drain from the interior back into a separate container. Never place watered down glaze back in the jar with non-thinned colour.

Keep in mind that you have already dampened the bisque and rolled thinned glaze on the interior, adding considerable moisture to your piece. If you begin adding fired finishes to the exterior, the

colours may not go on as heavily as they would on bisque that is not completely saturated with water. The end result could be a streaky finish. It may be a good idea to allow the piece to dry overnight before adding colours to the outside or wait to roll the interior after you have completed the exterior.

Just because a colour is fired does not automatically mean it is safe for outdoor use. Underglazes not covered with a glaze, for example, can be porous and absorb moisture. Check with your supplier to make sure the finish you select will repel liquids. Some non-fired water repellents can be used over the top of porous fired finishes. Those will be discussed later in the article.

### **Non-Fired Finishes**

Many non-fired finishes will adhere well to ware used outdoors. How many times have you spilled colour on your clothes and could not get it to come out after repeated washing? It is safe to say that many colours will not wash away simply from a small amount of rain. Sealing and protecting these colours is the key to longevity. Just like fired finishes, the interior and exterior of your piece needs to be completely sealed so moisture cannot enter the ware.

It is possible to glaze the inside of your bisque and then fire before completing the outside with non-fired products, seal the outside with a spray sealer and use water repellent to seal the interior. Many colours manufacturers have non-fired water repellents that can be rolled or brushes on. Wait to use the sealer on the interior until after the exterior is sealed and dry. Do not be concerned if colors appear to be altered after applying water repellents. Colours should return to a normal shade once the sealer dries.

Over time, many non-fired finishes will fade. Various reds and oranges tend to fade faster than other colours. Just like the colour on your home, car, or anything else outdoors, there is not a whole lot you can do to prevent this from happening.

### **Protecting Finished Items**

Always bring the items into your home at the end of the season if you are in an area where temperatures get below freezing. If a piece has slightest bit of moisture in the clay, the moisture can expand, causing the surface to flake and fall apart. During winter months, store items in an area that does not fall below freezing. Your garage storage shed or attic may not be the best place to store these items; your pieces can still freeze and flake as mentioned earlier. Clean the pieces well and remove any debris on a regular basis. Wet leaves can practically bake onto the surface in the sun, damaging some finishes. Do not let objects sit in water. Most people think of this as literally sitting in a puddle of water. However, allowing an object to sit on wet soil can have the same effect. Try placing the ware on top of landscape stone or other material that will keep it away from the wet ground.

Looking for any chips or cracks in the finish and repair immediately. Small stones shooting from a lawnmower can leave tiny chips on the surface. Regardless of the finish on the pieces, these imperfections need to be repaired.

It is not recommended that you touch up fired finishes and try to re-fire them after items have been placed outdoors. Try touching up these spots by mixing non-fired finishes to disguise the areas the best you can and then cover the areas well with a water repellent or sealer. It would not hurt to brush a coat of water repellent over the entire exterior and roll it on the interior to catch any spots you may not notice. Since the repellent will only soak into areas where bare bisque is exposed, it would not hurt to do this practice on an annual basis just to be safe.

Imperfections or damage to non-fired finishes can be touched up with the original colour and sealed. Reseal non-fired finishes annually. Seal the exterior of your creations with a good sealer that will protect the finish and do not forget about resealing the interior with water repellent.

If you sell finished pieces, let your customers know some of these tips to keep items in good condition. You may even wish to include a bottle of water repellent with items purchased or offer them for sale. If you give items as gifts, pass on these tips and source for purchasing water repellent. Studio owners should take advantage of the extra sale by placing water repellent near garden items with a sign reminding customers to purchase this product along with other finishes and products ideal for garden items.

The range of subject matter, detail and finishes far outweigh what is available in concrete lawn ornaments. Ceramic clay is generally much lighter and easier to move than big, bulky, solid concrete items. The surface of ceramics is much smoother and easier to paint than rough porous stone. Ceramic have all the advantages concrete cannot offer.

By making good choices right from the start your project and following through with good preventative care, your finest outdoor artwork will last for years.