

by Beth Fox

### ***The Next Frontier***

**There's gold in them thar hills!" was once the fearless prospector's cry. Today, painting contractors prospecting for work should train their eyes on the gold that awaits . . . on the garage floor.**

That's right: the garage floor. There are 76 million garages in the United States, according to the Census Bureau. Less than 1 percent are coated, but that is changing rapidly, manufacturers report.

"It's a very large growth area, as far as we can tell," says Mike Kozlowski, director of marketing for Thompson's Water Seal. "All our research indicates that this category is growing by at least 5 percent a year — and it's probably up about 34 percent or 35 percent since the year 2000."



### **A popular add-on**

Industrywide figures are hard to come by, but several coatings manufacturers report similar trends. At California-based Excellent Coatings, sales of garage-floor coatings have soared by 50 percent to 60 percent just in the last two to three years, according to CEO Gwynn Stegen.

"More and more people are interested in these kinds of coatings," Stegen says. "They spend \$600,000 or \$700,000 on their home, and they want everything to look perfect."

Garage floor coating is "becoming a more popular add-on. Contractors try to offer it at a new housing development as an upgrade."

How did the lowly garage floor rise to such a high profile?

"People are more interested in garage organization in general," explains Steve Golich, brand manager for Rust-Oleum High Performance Products. "More and more people are using garages as the main entrance to their homes."

Some homeowners have remodeled as much as possible elsewhere and are looking for a new project, Golich adds.

“They’ve done a lot of these projects already: kitchen remodeling, painting of the living room, exterior landscaping-type projects. The garage is the last frontier.”

Personalizing the garage – down to the floor – follows the style trend that consumers already demand in everything from cars to iPods.

So let’s hitch up the old wagon and go prospecting.

### **Surveying the territory**

The severe environment of a garage demands a coating that can withstand everything from intense heat to leaking antifreeze. Superior adhesion, chemical resistance and durability have made the two-part epoxies best sellers among garage floor coatings. Decorative chips or flakes can be added for aesthetic appeal.

Many of these products promise one-coat coverage, water cleanup and low odor. Some manufacturers claim that no mechanical prep work is necessary, while others recommend improving adhesion with grinding or beadblasting.

Because epoxy coatings are not breathable, they may blister if significant moisture vapor is present. Epoxy systems vary in the amount of moisture vapor emissions they can handle before failing.

Many are rated at about 3 pounds of emissions, but some are rated much higher.

Color choices for these epoxy systems tend to be limited to grays and browns, but contractors can expand their aesthetic options by applying one or more concrete stains to achieve a different color or textured appearance, followed by a clear epoxy topcoat.

DIY garage-floor coating kits are available for about \$50, but few consumers have shown the time, desire or equipment to tackle the job. That means plenty of opportunity for the painting prospector – uh, contractor.

Big-box stores typically estimate \$1,500 for labor and materials on a coating install for a two-car garage. Contractors are charging from \$2.50 to \$5.00 per square foot to coat a typical two-car garage. They generally spend part of one day on surface prep and a day applying the coating. A third visit may be required to scrape off decorative flakes or apply a clear topcoat.

### **Forging ahead**



Photos: Versatile Building Products  
Coating a garage floor is now a one-trip, one-day job, allowing contractors to increase their productivity, says Versatile Building Products.

Three things are important when planning a garage floor job: Prep, prep and prep. Success in applying an epoxy floor coating depends on proper surface preparation; avoid the temptation to cut corners, advises Stegen.

“The minute that they have to go back to a job, that comes right out of their bottom line,” she says. “The most important thing for them to do is to take their time, to do their due diligence, make sure they don’t have moisture issues, make sure they do the prep properly, and they’ll be successful.”



A new surface improves the appearance of the garage floor and simplifies maintenance.

On the other hand, contractors can save time – and maximize profits – by being on the lookout for clusters of jobs. With tens of millions of garages out there, and more every day, opportunities for work abound.

“If you do one garage floor, you’re maybe working a few hours a day on that project,” says Stegen. “If you’re doing three garage floors in the same neighborhood, you get economy of scale and production, and the profit margin goes up significantly.

“I would recommend going after new construction, where [contractors] can do multiple houses. That’s where the real money can be made.”

Of course, faster drying time is always a plus. Among the manufacturers promoting their drying times is Versatile Building Products, which rolled out Roll On Rock System 4h in August. Materials for a two-car garage will run about \$600, says company president Mike Meursing.

Contractors “can go to a garage and coat it within three hours,” says Meursing. “A guy can now double his production, and he can double his territory. Now he’s not going to mind driving two and a half hours to a job because he’s only going to go there once.”

### **Staking a claim**

Building a garage-floor business starts with legwork. The first step is to educate homeowners and builders at jobsites about the benefits of coating a garage floor: improved appearance, simpler maintenance, increased market appeal.

“The contractors who will be the most successful are the ones who promote this type of service,” says Golich.

“I think plenty of contractors are capable of coating concrete floors; it’s a pretty easy project. Once you have everything moved out, it’s as easy as — or easier than — painting walls, because you don’t have to be nearly as precise.”

Contractors can promote garage-floor coating as an add-on service. “They can also add value by offering things like an anti-skid additive or decorative chips,” notes Golich.

Product literature and mailers can help. “We sell doorknob hangers, brochures and color charts, and we have sample boards,” says Meursing. “When they’re doing the job and they’re waiting that half hour for the material to dry, they put the doorknob hangers on the knobs in the neighborhood. They use the brochures to sell the product when they meet the customer.”

Happy customers can generate “a referral rate that’s probably two garages for every garage they do,” he says.

Great photos are a must, advises Kozlowski. “When the contractors show photos of other jobs that have been done, I think that’s a great clincher to this type of deal — how clean and how good-looking your garage can be as well.”

Chuckling, Kozlowski adds, “Of course, the best thing that a contractor can probably do is help the homeowner clean out their garage.”