



Why Are Barns Red?

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Ever wonder why barns are painted red in color? Red is (or was) a popular color for older barns, but perhaps surprisingly, due not so much to its color shade, but for its usefulness.

Many years ago, when Michigan was being settled and barns were being built, choices for paints, sealers and other building materials did not exist. Farmers had to be resourceful in finding or making a paint that would protect and seal the wood on their barns. It's likely that Michigan farmers used time-honored traditions brought with them from Europe.

Hundreds of years ago, European farmers would seal their barns with linseed oil, which is an orange-colored oil derived from the seeds of the flax plant. To this oil, they would add a variety of things, most often milk and lime, but also ferrous oxide, otherwise known as *rust*. Rust was plentiful on farms and because it killed fungi and mosses that might grow on barns, it was very effective as a sealant. Adding it turned the mixture red. As European settlers crossed over to America, they brought with them the tradition of red barns.

In the mid-to-late 1800s, when paints began to be produced with chemical pigments, red paint was the most inexpensive to buy. Red was the color of favor until whitewash became cheaper, at which point white barns began to spring up.

Speaking of whitewash, just as barns were not originally painted red, neither were farmhouses painted white. They were *whitewashed*. Whitewash is a mixture of lime, water and salt which is easy to make at home, thus making it cheaper than paint. The lime and salt in the whitewash kept wood-eating fungi from growing, which kept the wood from rotting. Plus it was safe for animals since it did not contain lead as early paints did.

There are some myths that are associated with red barns. One belief is that the red color would help the farmer's cows find their way home. That of course is not true, considering cows are colorblind to the colors red and green. Others believe red barns came from copying Scandinavian farmers who painted their buildings in rusty-colored hues so they would appear to be made of brick—a material they considered to be a sign of wealth.

Ultimately, red barns (and whitewashed farm houses) spread in popularity due to functionality and convenience. The pattern of white farmhouses and red barns grew into an American tradition that is still common across the countryside today.

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