

Your Cabin's Roof

When you're designing your cabin, you'll be making very important decisions about the cabin's roof: its crowning glory! If you make good choices, you'll enjoy the way the roof looks, and you'll wile away many happy hours staying warm, dry, and cozy under your worry-free roof. But if your choices aren't so good, your roof could end up being a source of aggravation and a financial drain.

Things to think about when designing your roof

You'll need to think about the pitch of the roof. You must choose a material for the roof covering. You'll have to decide whether you're going to have dormers, skylights, both, or neither; you'll also want to make sure flashing and venting are handled properly. Even the color of your roof can be an important decision. In this article we'll focus on three of these decisions: pitch, roofing material, and color.

Pitch

The word "pitch" refers to the steepness (slope) of a roof. Roof pitch is specified as a ratio that says how many inches the roof rises for every 12 inches it runs. For example, a roof with a 5/12 pitch rises 5 inches for every 12 inches of horizontal distance; a roof with a 12/12 pitch rises 12 inches for every 12 inches of horizontal distance.

12/12 is a common roof pitch for cabin architecture, for a number of reasons. A 12/12 pitch is steep enough so water runs off the roof immediately and snow slides off the roof pretty quickly, yet it's shallow enough so installing and maintaining the roof isn't too difficult or too dangerous. Also, a 12/12 pitch forms a 45-degree angle relative to walls and floors, and 45 degrees is an easy angle to work with when you're doing calculations during design of your cabin and during construction of it. In addition, a roof with a 12/12 pitch allows you to make good use of space in your cabin, because – unless your cabin is very tiny – a 12/12 pitch will give you enough clearance overhead so the cabin can have a second floor with rooms directly underneath the roof.

Many people think a building with a steep roof pitch is more interesting and more pleasing to look at than a building with a roof that has a shallow pitch. Note, however, that a roof with a pitch that's steeper than 12/12 can be challenging to build and difficult to maintain. Most architects and designers as well as ordinary people seem to think a pitch of 10/12 or steeper is attractive on most buildings.

If you're a do-it-yourselfer, you might be tempted to design your cabin with a gently sloped roof or even a flat roof, because a roof like that is easy to build. Don't use a flat roof unless you're building your cabin in a location with an arid climate! In an area that gets a fair amount of precipitation, a flat roof is likely to leak. And in a cold climate, a flat or shallow pitch is a poor choice because snow won't slide off of it, and the weight of accumulated snow puts stress on the structure itself.

Roofing material

Lots of different roofing products are available today: asphalt shingles, fiberglass shingles, wood shakes, real slate, rubber shingles that look like slate, metal shingles, metal “ribbed” roofing, clay tiles, and more. Two of the most popular roofing materials for cabins are asphalt shingles and metal ribbed roofing, and those are the products we’ll focus on here.

For several reasons, asphalt shingles are a good choice for roofing a cabin. They can be relatively inexpensive, and they’re available in many styles and colors. They’re easy to install: if you’re a fit and capable do-it-yourselfer, you can probably install asphalt shingles on your own. (Be sure to wear a safety harness, though.) And if you’re not a DIYer, you won’t have trouble finding a professional roofer that is experienced with installation of asphalt shingles. A roof made of asphalt shingles is also easy to maintain.

For some cabin owners, metal ribbed roofing might be a better choice than asphalt shingles. For example, you might want to choose metal ribbed roofing instead of asphalt shingles if your cabin is in a location that gets a lot of snow, because (assuming an identical roof pitch) snow slides off a metal roof more quickly than it slides off an asphalt roof. Another good thing about metal roofing is that it’s likely to last longer than asphalt shingles.

Some kinds of metal ribbed roofing are well suited for DIY installation; other kinds require special skills and equipment.

One good reason to use metal roofing is that you might be eligible for a tax credit. Search the Internet for details on this.

Color

You’ll want to choose a roof color that coordinates well with the colors you’re using for siding and trim. Most building-supply stores can provide samples of the roofing materials they sell; use the samples to decide which roof color looks best with your siding color and trim color.

Note that the color of your roofing material isn’t just an aesthetic choice; it can affect the function of your roof. A dark roof color is a good choice in a location that gets lots of snow. Why? Because dark colors absorb heat; this means the sun heats up a dark-colored roof faster than it heats up a light-colored roof, and so snow slides off a dark roof sooner than it would slide off a roof that’s light in color. Following along with this logic: picking a light-colored roof is smart for a cabin in a warm climate. That’s because a light-colored roof stays cooler than a dark-colored one, and a cooler roof means cooler temperatures inside the cabin.

Choose carefully!

As with most choices concerning the design of your cabin, you’ll need to balance aesthetics, function, and cost when making decisions about the roof. If you make the right decisions, you’ll devote your spare time to fishing, hunting, boating, skiing, hiking, reading, or gardening – all the things you dreamed about when you built the cabin in the first place. But if your choices aren’t so good, you’ll be spending some of those precious leisure hours on a ladder!