

# How Fit are the Finishes?



*PS testers disassemble The Rack once again as we take a look at how the exterior wood coatings are handling the exposure test.*

## *Eighteen-month checkup finds some test panels are showing signs of aging.*

We're 18 months into testing, and the all-star wood finish search continues. *Practical Sailor* launched a long-term durability test of varnishes and varnish alternatives in the summer of 2008 with 56 products; as we start 2011, 35 of them are still holding their own.

Because the life expectancy of a wood finish can vary from a few months to several years, we knew this evaluation would be a lengthy endeavor—a test of the finishes' endurance and our patience. And so here we are, a year and a half after mounting the test panels, with some failed coatings and others that have aged less than gracefully, but no sign of the finish line on the horizon.

We opened this series of reports with a look at the coatings' application and initial gloss in the August 2007 (one-part varnishes), October 2007 (varnish alternatives), December 2007 (two-part varnishes), and April 2008 (teak oils and stains) issues. Reports on the coatings' durability at six months and one year ran in the May 2009 and December 2009 issues, respectively. Here, we offer the 18-month report on those that have survived.

### **WHAT WE'RE TESTING**

Our goal with this test is to determine the top exterior wood finishes in each category (one- and two-part varnish, teak oil, varnish alternative, etc.) and to find an overall all-star wood coating. There's no one-size-fits-all solution when it comes to wood finishes, but in our opinion, the ideal finish is relatively easy to apply, easy to maintain, lasts multiple seasons, and is affordable.

"Easy to apply" and "easy to maintain," however, can be very subjective concepts. The boat owner who considers the painstaking preparation and careful application requirements of a two-part varnish to be a sort of therapeutic meditation interprets the terms

much differently than the one who regards brightwork maintenance as a form of torture.

With that in mind, *PS* designed this test to encompass all types of wood coatings, enabling every boat owner to find the finish that best matches his taste, potential labor investment, and wood protection needs. It's up to you to decide what's therapy, what's torture, and what's worth it.

When choosing a wood finish, knowing the pros and cons of each finish type is helpful. One- and two-part varnishes are clear, hard coatings that offer a deep, classic mirror-like finish. Prep, application, and re-application are more labor-intensive than with other finishes and require a more skilled hand, but they usually need less frequent maintenance and are more durable.

The top selling point for varnish alternatives is their ease of application: They require fewer coats than varnish, dry faster, and require little or no sanding between coats. The softer, flexible finishes need to be re-applied more frequently than varnish and generally do not last as long, but re-application and maintenance are a breeze. Although

### **MORE ONLINE**

- Check out the online version of this article at [www.practical-sailor.com](http://www.practical-sailor.com), where you'll find tips on maintaining wood finishes and a primer on the various types of coatings.
- Find application do's and don'ts in the "Tools and Techniques" section's "Sparkling Brightwork" article.

## MAINTENANCE

Many one-part varnishes (top row) are due for a maintenance coat, but the two-part varnishes (bottom row), for the most part, are going strong.

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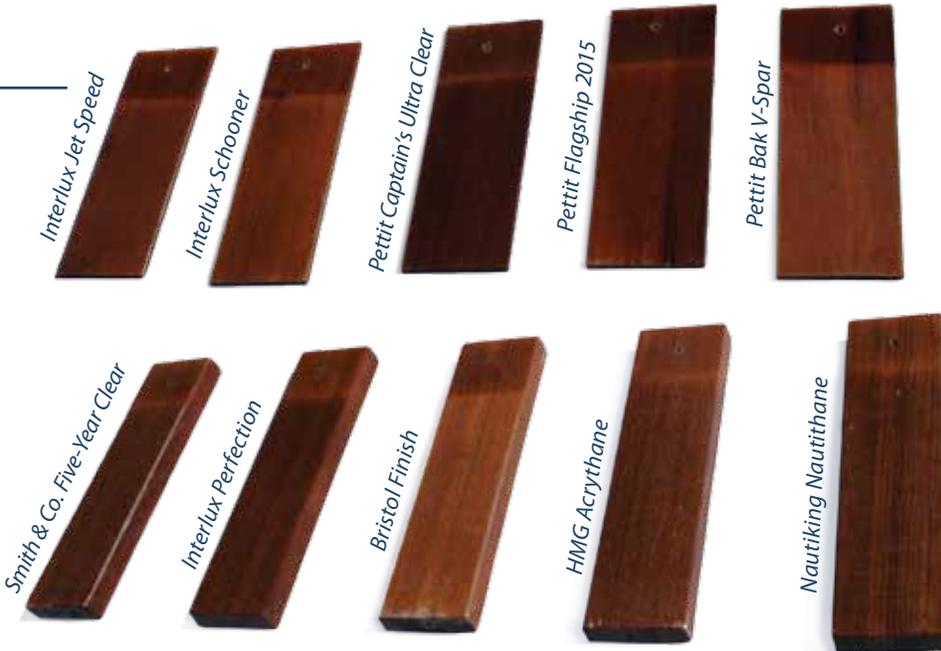
some can be overcoated with a glossy sealer, they don't have the high-gloss finish of a hard varnish and often are pigmented. These opaque stains mask the wood's grain somewhat but are touted as offering better UV protection than traditional clear varnishes.

Teak oils and sealers are favored for their ease of application, nonskid properties, and resistance to blistering. They are not as durable as other finishes and require frequent re-application, but they are easier to maintain. Teak-oil critics say they attract dirt and encourage mold and mildew growth, which we found to be true in some of our test panels. (For more pros and cons of various wood coatings and a wood finishes primer, view the online version of this article at [www.practical-sailor.com](http://www.practical-sailor.com).)

When this long-term exposure test began, the test field comprised 22 one-part varnishes, six two-part varnishes, 18 synthetics and stains, and eight teak oils. The test products included tried-and-true coatings and market newcomers from such resident boatyard names as Interlux, Epifanes, Pettit, Star brite, Signature Finishes, and West Marine; we also tested hardware-store brands like Ace and Min-Wax. The field has been pared down some in the last 18 months: None of the teak oils performed well enough to make it past the year mark, and nearly half of the teak treatments were cut from the line-up.

As we've noted in the past, marine coatings is an ever-evolving market, so it's no surprise that over the course of a years-long test, some products are discontinued, re-formulated, or fall victim to the slowed economy. At the same time, new products are hitting store shelves regularly as coatings makers advance their own search for the ideal wood finish.

Since this evaluation began, Pettit discontinued the Bak V-Spar and Interlux reformulated Perfection (now Perfection Plus), boosting UV protection.



Interlux also discontinued its Jet Speed and Goldspar, and replaced its Schooner varnish with Schooner Gold, which is said to offer better UV resistance; however, the maker re-released the original Schooner when its 2010 quick-dry finish, Compass, was recalled after a few months of production (Mailport, May 2010).

WoodPlus Coatings also has re-formulated its product: The coating we tested was labeled WoodPlus Marine Natural, but the current formulation is being sold as WoodPlus Ultra 10 Natural. According to the manufacturer, the only difference between the two is that the Ultra 10 has fewer VOCs (volatile organic compounds), making it more environmentally friendly.

Smith and Co.'s Five-Year Clear, a well-known two-part varnish, has been temporarily discontinued. The manufacturer cited the U.S.'s lagging economy for the halt. "The Five Year Clear will be made again when the economy recovers and consumer demand returns," explained owner Steve Smith. "We are accumulating a waiting list."

We've decided to keep the discontinued and re-formulated products in the test line-up as their performance is still relevant for comparison. New products have been put into testing in the field (See "Test Boats," page 30) or have been added to the roster for our next round of wood finishes testing.

Testers are evaluating the wood coatings on how well their coating integrity, gloss, and color fare over time with constant exposure to the elements. The results will help determine which type

of coating offers the best and longest protection and which products stand out among their peers.

### HOW WE TESTED

Each test product was applied per makers' instructions to a 6- to 8-inch panel of bare solid teak, and each panel was assigned a number for blind judging. In instances where manufacturers gave a range for the number of coats to apply, testers went with the minimum.

We rated each product's ease of application—how smoothly it went on, how complete the instructions were, and how simple the process was. Testers also rated the varnishes' original gloss and reflective qualities. Coatings intended to have matte or semi-gloss finishes, like teak oils and stains, received no "original gloss" rating. (For more on the products' application, revisit the previous articles in this test series mentioned above, which detail application requirements for each coating.)

The 56 test panels were mounted on a wooden rack, and in the summer of 2008, the rack was set up at a 45-degree angle in an unobstructed area on the roof of the *Practical Sailor* workshop in Sarasota, Fla. The test setup ensured that all panels received the same amount of weather exposure. The top part of each panel was covered, creating a control area testers use for comparison over time. Every six months, testers disassemble the rack and rate the panels.

The test protocol does not include regular maintenance or touch-ups of the coatings, so users can expect the

AS VALUE GUIDE		VARNISH ALTERNATIVES							
PRODUCT	PRICE	AFTER 1.5 YEARS			AFTER 1 YEAR			INITIAL RATINGS	
		COATING INTEGRITY	GLOSS RETENTION	COLOR RETENTION	COATING INTEGRITY	GLOSS RETENTION	COLOR RETENTION	EASE OF APP.	GLOSS / FINISH NOTES
Deks Olje No. 1 with No. 2 overcoat	\$19 (1); \$25 (2)	Poor	Poor	Fair	Good	Fair	Good	Fair	Honey brown / Satin
Epifanes Rapidclear	\$33 / quart	Fair	Good	Fair	Fair	Good	Fair	Excellent	Clear / Satin
Interlux Sikkens Cetol Marine (alone)	\$25 / quart	Good	NA	Fair	Excellent	NA	Good	Excellent	Opaque amber / Matte
Interlux Sikkens Cetol Marine with Marine Gloss ✓	\$31 / quart (Gloss: \$33)	Excellent	Excellent	Good	Excellent	Excellent	Good	Good	Opaque amber; clear overcoat / Satin
Interlux Sikkens Cetol Marine Light (alone)	\$26 / quart	Good	NA	Fair	Good+	NA	Fair	Excellent	Opaque light amber / Matte
Interlux Sikkens Cetol Marine Light with Marine Gloss ✓	\$26 / quart (Gloss: \$30)	Excellent	Good	Good	Excellent	Excellent	Good	Good	Opaque amber; clear overcoat / Satin
Interlux Sikkens Cetol Natural Teak (alone)	\$30 / quart	Poor	NA	Fair	Fair	NA	Fair	Excellent	Golden-translucent / Matte
Interlux Sikkens Cetol Natural Teak with Marine Gloss	\$27 / quart (Gloss: \$30)	Good	Good	Fair	Good	Good	Fair	Good	Golden-translucent, clear overcoat / Satin
Le Tonkinois Bio Impression with Vernis	NA, \$30 / liter	Good	Fair	Fair	Good	Fair	Fair	Good	Warm, dark amber / High gloss
West Marine WoodPro Plus Semi-Gloss <sup>2</sup>	\$30 / quart	Fair	Fair	Fair	Fair	Fair	Fair	Good	Clear / Satin
WoodPlus Marine Natural <sup>1</sup>	\$21 / quart	Good	Fair	Fair	Good	Good	Fair	Excellent	Reddish brown / Low gloss

✓ Recommended <sup>1</sup> Formula changed since test began. <sup>2</sup> West Marine's re-branded Epifanes Rapid Clear.

products to last longer on a boat when they are maintained regularly and re-applied before the finishes are too far gone. Check out the online version of this article for tips on keeping your brightwork in good health.

### HOW WE RATED

Coating integrity ratings take into account the entire panel. The ratings translate to real-world use like this: Excellent and Good ratings indicate that no maintenance is needed; Fair ratings mean the coating is due for a maintenance coat; Poor ratings mean that some TLC is long overdue and extra elbow grease would be required to bring the finish back to top form. Excellent ratings are given only to those with an uncompromised coating. Panels with Poor ratings are pulled from the test.

Color and gloss retention ratings are relative to the panel's original finish, not that of other coatings. So even if a panel's initial gloss rated only Fair initially, it

can earn an Excellent for gloss retention if it maintained that same level of gloss for 18 months. Initial gloss and ease of application are relative to the field within each coating category; these were assigned immediately after the panels were coated.

Recommended coatings in the one-part varnish and varnish alternatives categories earned three Good or better ratings at the 18-month checkup, and those in the two-part varnish group earned two or more Excellent ratings.

### WHAT WE FOUND AT 18 MONTHS

Regular brightwork maintenance is a must, but how often you have to apply a fresh coat or do a few touchups depends a lot on what type of finish has been used. Our test results so far have backed the generally held knowledge that teak oils do not have the longevity of hard finishes, requiring re-application a few times a year, and that one-part varnishes should be maintained annually. None of

the teak oils and sealers PS tested made it past one year, and a significant number of the one-part varnishes began showing signs of weathering between the 12- and 18-month marks.

The re-application times for varnish alternatives/teak treatments is less predictable, and vary by product. In this test, a handful failed after one year, but those that held on have shown little change in the last six months.

The two-part varnishes have performed as expected, living up to their reputation for exceptional durability. All six original test products are still hanging in there, and most aren't even ready for a maintenance coat yet.

Four one-part varnishes slipped in coating-integrity ratings from Excellent to Fair: West Marine 5-Star Premium, Pettit Z-Spar Captain's Traditional Amber, HMG K Type Varnish, and Epifanes Clear High Gloss. In real-world use, these would be due for some sanding and a re-coat, as would the HMG Berenice, whose

**AS VALUE GUIDE ONE-PART VARNISHES AND TWO-PART SYSTEMS**

PRODUCT	PRICE/SOURCE	AFTER 1.5 YEARS			AFTER 1 YEAR			INITIAL RATINGS	
		COATING INTEGRITY	GLOSS RETENTION	COLOR RETENTION	COATING INTEGRITY	GLOSS RETENTION	COLOR RETENTION	EASE OF APP.	GLOSS
Ace Polyurethane Clear Finish Gloss 16377	\$15 / qt.	Poor	Poor	Fair	Excellent	Good	Fair	Good	Good
Ace Spar Varnish Gloss 16373 <b>\$</b>	\$16 / qt.	Good -	Fair	Good	Good	Good	Good	Excellent	Good
Coelan (with primer) <b>✓</b>	\$144 / kit	Good	Good	Good	Excellent	Excellent	Good	Good	Excellent
HMG Coma Berenice	\$34 / liter	Fair -	Fair	Poor	Good	Good	Fair	Good	Excellent
Deft Defthane Poly Satin	\$14 / quart	Good	Poor	Fair	Excellent	Good	Good	Excellent	Fair
Detco Crystal	\$37 / quart	Good	Fair	Good	Good	Good	Good	Fair	Good
Epifanes Clear High Gloss	\$25 / quart	Fair	Fair	Good	Excellent	Excellent	Good	Good	Excellent
Epifanes Wood Finish Gloss	\$36 / quart	Good -	Good	Good	Excellent	Excellent	Good	Good	Excellent
HMG K Type Varnish	\$30 / liter	Fair	Fair	Fair	Excellent	Good	Fair	Good	Excellent
Interlux Goldspar Clear <sup>2</sup>	\$22 / quart	Fair	Fair	Good	Good	Excellent	Good	Good	Excellent
Interlux Jet Speed <sup>2</sup>	\$22 / quart	Fair	Poor	Good	Fair	Fair	Good	Excellent	Excellent
Interlux Schooner	\$20 / quart	Good	Fair	Fair	Good+	Good	Fair	Good	Good
Le Tonkinois No. 1	\$30 / liter	Fair	Fair	Good	Fair	Fair	Good	Excellent	Excellent
Le Tonkinois Vernis	\$30 / liter	Good	Fair	Fair	Excellent	Fair	Good	Excellent	Excellent
Minwax In/Outdoor Helmsman Spar Urethane	\$15 / quart	Good	Fair	Fair	Good	Good	Fair	Excellent	Excellent
Pettit Bak V-Spar 2053 <sup>2</sup>	\$14 (pint)	Fair	Fair	Poor	Fair	Poor	Fair	Excellent	Excellent
Pettit Z-Spar 2015 Flagship <b>✓</b>	\$30 / quart	Good	Good	Good	Good	Excellent	Good	Excellent	Excellent
Pettit Z-Spar Captain's Ultra Clear 2067	\$40 / quart	Good -	Good	Good	Excellent	Good	Fair	Excellent	Excellent
Pettit Z-Spar Captain's 1015 Traditional Amber	\$25 / quart	Fair	Good	Good	Excellent	Good+	Good	Good	Good
Pettit Z-Spar Captain's EZ Care 1016 (Woolsey) <b>✓</b>	\$26 / quart	Good	Good	Good	Good	Good	Good	Excellent	Good
West Marine 5-Star Premium	\$30 / quart	Fair	Fair	Good	Excellent	Good	Fair	Good	Excellent
<b>TWO-PART SYSTEMS</b>									
Bristol Finish, Traditional Amber	\$70 per kit (1 quart)	Fair	Excellent	Good	Fair	Excellent	Good	Excellent	Excellent
HMG Acrythane XSC <b>✓</b>	\$38 / liter kit	Good+	Excellent	Excellent	Good+	Excellent	Good	Good	Good
Honey Teak with overcoat	\$2 / sq. ft.	Fair	Good	Good	Fair	Good	Good	Excellent	Excellent
Interlux Perfection <sup>1</sup>	\$60 / qt. kit	Excellent	Excellent	Good	Excellent	Excellent	Good	Good	Excellent
Nautiking NautiThane <b>✓</b>	\$114 / qt. kit	Excellent	Excellent	Good	Excellent	Excellent	Good	Excellent	Good
Smith & Co. Five-Year Clear <sup>2</sup>	NA	Good	Good	Fair	Good+	Excellent	Good	Good	Excellent

**✓ Recommended \$ Budget Buy**

<sup>1</sup> Formula changed since test began. <sup>2</sup>Discontinued.

ratings dropped across the board.

As testers reported in December 2009, some teak treatments (LeTonkinois) exhibited a dried-out look after 12 months. Now, after a year and a half, some one-part varnishes have begun showing the

same reptile-skin look, including Pettit Captain's Ultra Clear, Interlux Goldspar, HMG K Type Varnish, and Deks Olje. The tiny cracks are imperceptible from 5 feet away but the finishes look dull and ready for some maintenance attention.

Epifanes' Wood Finish Gloss and Clear High Gloss, which have done very well in past tests, also showed signs of drying out—a significant change from

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*In a comparative field test, PS applied Vermont Natural Coatings PolyWhey and Interlux Cetol Natural to the teak aboard one of our test boats.*

## A Wood Finish That's Whey Easy

Take a tour of any marine store's maintenance aisle, and you're likely to spot a dozen or more products that claim to be "eco-friendly," but how often do you come across one that can count "sustainable" in its green-marketing arsenal?

Vermont Natural Coatings (VNC) not only manufactures products that meet environmental regulations and consumer demand for eco-conscious options, but the company uses recycled materials in the finish formula. VNC's PolyWhey line of interior and exterior wood finishes uses whey protein, a by-product of cheese-making, as a binder, making it more naturally sustainable than petroleum-based polyurethane finishes.

Impressed by the company's creative use of dairy industry "trash," *Practical Sailor* testers decided to apply PolyWhey to the teak aboard one of our test boats. The head-to-head field test pits the VNC PolyWhey Exterior against Interlux Sikens Cetol Natural (without gloss overcoat), which has similar application, aesthetic, and durability characteristics.

Vermont Natural Coatings is the innovation of founder-president Andrew Meyer, who actually grew up on an organic dairy farm in Vermont. VNC's PolyWhey, which has been on the market for only a few years, was the result of the company's collaboration with scientists from the University of Vermont as they sought new uses for whey proteins. Whey is what's left

over after cow's milk curdles; it's made up of whey protein and casein protein. Whey protein is not your typical wood finish ingredient, so testers were more than curious (read: skeptical) about its durability in the marine environment.

### HOW WE'RE TESTING

In the early fall, testers applied the VNC Exterior Wood Finish (in Caspian Clear) to the teak in the cockpit of a Cape Dory 25. Following maker instructions for preparation and application, we put three coats on the coaming and companionway trim. We applied the PolyWhey, which can be brushed or sprayed on, using foam brushes. Per the directions, testers did not sand between coats or thin the product.

Testers then applied three coats of the Cetol Natural to the boat's toerail. The two products were applied to compare application and durability. A toerail typically sees more action than a boat's coamings—although the cockpit on a CD25 is a very wet place in stiff winds, and the coamings get constant abuse from crew backs and knees—so we'll also be comparing the PolyWhey to the Cetol finish on the boat's tiller and hatch trim, which was applied about six months prior.

### WHAT WE FOUND

PolyWhey comes in clear or three semi-transparent shades. We opted for the natural look of the Caspian Clear, which

most closely matched the look of the Cetol Natural. Testers were somewhat surprised when we opened the can and peered into what looked like a cup of milk since we were expecting a clear product. While the color was a little off-putting during application, it dried completely transparent with a very low gloss.

Like most water-based varnish alternatives, PolyWhey boasts great coverage and quick drying. It emits no toxic fumes and has about one-fourth of the VOCs (volatile organic compounds) oil-based polyurethanes have, according to VNC.

Based on our experience, PolyWhey lives up to all of its application claims. It did not have the nostril-singing chemical smell some finishes have; it dried in about 40 minutes, although suggested re-coat time is one hour; and a little bit goes a very long way—1 quart will cover 50 to 100 square feet.

Other application bonuses: The soap-and-water cleanup made the process even easier, and we didn't have to worry about drips marring adjacent surfaces; we just wiped them up with a rag. If you're not used to applying low-viscosity finishes, test them out on a wood scrap first. It takes a few minutes' practice to get used to their watery nature and to learn to avoid puddling or dripping.

### CONCLUSION

The PolyWhey Caspian Clear gets two thumbs up for ease of application: It went on fast, clean, and easy. The matte finish looked great, letting the teak's natural grain shine. Best of all—in our opinion—the application can be done in a half-day (depending on the area being finished), and the coating is fully cured in two days. What set the PolyWhey apart is that by applying it, we knew we were taking a step—albeit a teeny one—toward supporting eco-friendly and sustainable boating practices.

Stay tuned for updates on how PolyWhey stacks up against the perennial-favorite varnish alternative, Cetol. VNC touts PolyWhey as a waterproof, element-repelling finish that protects against mildew and UV. We'll see whether it meets its maker's durability promises as successfully as it did the application claims.

*The Cetol products we're testing have done a decent job of retaining their color, compared to some other varnish alternatives, like WoodPlus Marine, which faded.*

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their Excellent 12-month ratings, and proof that annual refresher coats are essential to maintaining a finish.

In the realm of varnish alternatives, coatings with more pigment/solids (intended to boost UV protection) like the Interlux Sikkens Cetol products and WoodPlus seem to be faring better than the others, and those with a varnish-like overcoat are also doing well. The orangey WoodPlus, for instance has maintained coating integrity for 18 months, although its low gloss has turned to no gloss.

The Cetol finishes—with the exception of the Natural Teak—saw few changes in the last six months. The Cetol Marine slid from an Excellent to a Good in coating integrity, and the Marine Light with gloss overcoat lost some of its luster, but it and the Cetol Marine with gloss held on to their Recommended status.

The category that saw the least change was the two-part varnish group. Five of the six coatings earned the same ratings at 18 months as they did after one year. The Smith and Co. Five Year Clear-coated panel was the only one to show any signs of change as it lost a bit of gloss. The Honey Teak panel's coating has pulled away at the edges some, but that was reported previously and has not worsened over time. A touch-up would be fast and easy, requiring a bit of sanding and an application of the two-part system's honey base over the existing clear topcoats.

The three test panels that notched

Poor ratings for coating integrity—Deks Olje No. 1 with No. 2 overcoat, Interlux's Cetol Natural Teak (without a gloss overcoat), and the Ace Polyurethane Clear Gloss—will be pulled from the test rack for the next go-round. That cuts the roster to 35 products advancing to the next round: Twenty one-part varnishes, six two-parters, and nine varnish alternatives.

### CONCLUSIONS

Our search for the "ideal" wood finish—easy to apply, easy to maintain, protects for multiple season, and is budget friendly—is something of a dreamer's mission at this point. We've yet to find a single product that meets all of these criteria, so there's always some compromise involved in choosing a wood coating. It's up to each boat owner to determine where he's willing to make that compromise.

If you're game for sacrificing some extra time (patience and sandpaper) up front in exchange for long-lasting protection and the sought-after wet-varnish look, then a one- or two-part hard varnish is the way to go. The two-part systems have held up the best so far, and all of those rated Excellent for coating integrity can be expected to last 18 months or more untouched.

For their continued deep gloss and top-notch protection, we recommend the HMG Acrythane XSC and Nautiking's Nautithane, although the Nautithane is among the most expensive products in the test. The standout single-part var-



Interlux Cetol Marine Light with Marine Gloss



WoodPlus Marine

nishes thus far are Pettit's Flagship 2015, Pettit Captain's EZ Care 1016, and the Coelan with primer. Perfection also is performing well, but we aren't recommending it since we haven't tested the re-formulated version. The Coelan finish—the most expensive test product—was applied over a primer, a step we recommend when using this product. The Coelan test panel without a primer saw a dramatic change in color after one year.

At the other end of the spectrum are the teak oils and sealers. No product in that group made it to the 18-month checkup, but the Star brite Classic Teak Sealer as the longest-lasting one.

Boat owners looking to take the middle ground—in terms of labor versus protection and aesthetics—would do well to give one of the Recommended varnish alternatives a try. Though they lack the high gloss of varnishes, the Cetol products are easy to apply and maintain, and they last seasons longer than teak oils. The Cetol Marine with gloss and Marine Light with gloss get testers' pick so far.

With 35 products still in the running in this test, we're keeping our fingers crossed that our continuous search for the Holy Grail of wood finishes will one day lead us to the ideal solution, one that doesn't involve compromise. Stay tuned for the two-year report on this exterior wood finishes test. ▲

### CONTACTS

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**DEFT FINISHES**, 800/458-3338,  
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**DEKS OLJE**  
800/321-3444, [www.floodco.com](http://www.floodco.com)

**DETCO**, 800/845-0023,  
[www.detcomarine.com](http://www.detcomarine.com)

**EPIFANES**, 800/269-0961,  
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**HMG MARINE**  
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