

Queen of the Special Order

BY CHARITY VOGEL

To anyone who's ever waited in line behind me at the hardware store: I'm very sorry. You see, that was me holding up the line for 45 minutes while you stood there clutching duct tape and light bulbs, looking at your watch and tapping your foot impatiently. And me, again, asking the clerk to please call a manager while you banged your cart and muttered nasty words.

I can't help it. I am the owner of an old house, which means I am, by default, queen of the special order, mistress of the involved sales process, and countess of the four million questions. I honestly don't mean to make life miserable for the poor soul stuck behind me in line. Which is why I apologize, and why I'll keep on apologizing—because I'm not about to change.

You know how it is: The day you buy an old house is the day you surrender any hope of quick, smooth, easy transactions for home improvement projects. The phrase *one size fits all* was not conceived by or for an old-house owner. Once you sign that mortgage and take possession of those keys, approximately half your life will be consumed by debating with salespeople and contractors over the types of materials you want to use (as close to the original as possible) and the way you want things done (authentically). The other half will be spent defending those choices to people who question your sanity.

Take doors. My husband spent all last summer sanding down and staining our gorgeous front door, a massive piece of Victorian oak, 92" x 36", which the former homeowners, for some reason, painted white. After restoring the oak door to pristine beauty, we decided we needed a new screen-to-storm door to complement it. (The current one is a flimsy piece of metal from the 1950s and far from weathertight, which is tough on both the door's finish and our heating bills).

There was, of course, a problem. The former owners, a lovely older couple, had jerry-rigged a standard 84" door to fit the 92" frame by nailing a piece of wood across the top. The result was like a pickle on a hot fudge sundae—it just didn't look right. We wanted the right size to replace the screen door, so we trudged resignedly into our local hardware store, where we asked a teenage salesperson to help us find Victorian-style screen doors that could convert to storm doors in the winter.

Here's the conversation that ensued: "What size do you want?" Regular width, but on the height that'll be (insert deep breath here) 92". "Ninety what? I don't know, man."

In 92" models, our options for ready-made doors were exactly zero. Anything in that size would have to be—you guessed it—special-ordered. It would also cost a small mountain of money. Plus, for a custom size, even special-order options are limited in color and style. Those big-box home improvement stores assume—correctly, I'm sure—that there won't be much demand for doors 92" high.

I remember a time when our shopping excursions were different. When we rented a 1940s Cape Cod, home improvements (over which we had free rein) were blessedly easy. We chose the paint and wallpaper for the entire first floor in one afternoon. When something broke, we found the most economical alternative and replaced it. No fuss, no muss.

Now we live in our own home, a



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three-storey Victorian built in 1898. We love this house like a person. We respect it, coddle it, even. So every change we make creates weeks or months of work: research on the Internet, discussions with old-house owners, arguments with contractors and hapless salespeople. You get the picture.

In the screen door aisle of the hardware store, the sales clerk tried to convince us not to do things the hard way. "Most people," he said, clearly trying to be tactful, "go the other way toward the standard-size door. Makes things a lot easier."

I'm sure it does, but that's not what we want. If we have to lead a special-order life, then so be it. We are the few, the brave, the unashamed. We are the hardy souls spending Saturday afternoons online, combing for vintage door hinges or reconditioned wall sconces. We know it's harder this way, I said to the clerk. Humor us.

Our new screen door arrives next month. It's taking a long time to get here, but it's a door 92" tall. Generic and standard? No way. It's special order or bust, and that's fine with us. 🏠