

# Wood vs. Fiberglass

---

**H**ow many times have I heard it? "Wooden boats are so beautiful, I'd love to have one if only the maintenance didn't cost so much." As a builder of wooden boats, I yearn for a snappy rejoinder to this fatal pronouncement. As an owner of an older wooden boat, I silently agree with it. My search for the snappy rejoinder has resulted in a lot of thought on the subject, something I have time to do while sanding my own boat. I wonder first what aspect of a wooden boat people are thinking of when they make that wistful remark?

Are fiberglass boats really so cheap to maintain? The answer is "yes" if you want to neglect your boat. There is no denying that fiberglass can stand a shocking amount of neglect. Are traditional wooden boats really more expensive to maintain? On average, the answer is again "yes," primarily because most wooden yachts today are old—40, 50 years or much more. Owners of older fiberglass boats (as well as aging baby boomers) are finding that age means more work, regardless of material.

In addition, most older sailing yachts have wooden spars, and often have more of them as a result of their split, and sometimes gaff, rigs. The proper maintenance of these spars is a much greater expense than that for aluminum or carbon-fiber ones, which can be simply tossed on a rack, or even left standing, for the winter.

Finally, all that brightwork on deck comes at a cost.

A good coat of varnish costs a lot more than a wax job.

So, here is my snappy rejoinder: If you take two equivalent boats, one fiberglass and one of traditional wood construction, both the same age, both with the same spars and an equal amount of brightwork, and both kept in true yacht fashion, there will be virtually no difference in their maintenance costs. Guaranteed.

About the only difference between these two boats will be in finishing the topsides, a small part of a yacht's total maintenance bill. A traditionally built boat will require a fresh coat of paint every year or two, while a fiberglass one will need waxing every year or Awlgrip every four to six years. In the long run, these three options will be very nearly equal in cost, especially if your topsides sustain the occasional scratch or ding.

As with all guarantees, there is fine print in which the guarantor attempts to get out of what he has just guaranteed. Both boats must be maintained at the same yard. This yard must be experienced and diligent in the care of wooden boats. And, the wooden boat must be built of quality materials by a knowledgeable and careful builder.

So, can we have our cake and eat it too—keep a wooden boat for the price of a fiberglass one? Well, yes and no. We can have our elegant lines and beautiful structural detailing. But if you want wooden spars and lots of varnish on deck, it's going to cost you, regardless of what your hull is made of.

—Doug Hylan