How to clean and prevent graffiti on your property

Graffiti is irritating to discover, can attract crime and be difficult to remove. Here's what you need to know about preventing and cleaning graffiti on your property.

Coming home to graffiti scrawled over your property can be a heart-sinking moment. Unfortunately, graffiti is not a rare occurrence in Victoria, particularly for homeowners in the inner suburbs of Melbourne.

For example, the Yarra City Council, which includes the suburbs of Abbotsford, Burnley, Carlton North, Clifton Hill, Collingwood, Cremorne, Fitzroy, Fitzroy North, Princes Hill, Richmond and parts of Alphington and Fairfield, reports that each year, it removed around 30,000 instances of graffiti at an approximate cost of $800,000 - and this is just a small percentage of all cases of graffiti.

What is graffiti vandalism?
As opposed to the commissioned works of art that have made Melbourne famous, a graffiti vandal will mark words or images such as a "tag" (signature) on public or private property without consent. Graffiti vandals usually use spray paint or felt tip pens to draw on surfaces, or sharp instruments to scratch on them. Buildings, walls, fences, signage and vehicles are all prime targets for graffiti vandals.

It is a crime to mark publicly visible graffiti on property without the owner's consent under the Victorian Graffiti Prevention Act 2007. Offenders can receive up to two years imprisonment and maximum fines of more than $29,000. But that doesn't stop the efforts of the most dedicated graffiti vandals. Here's everything you need to know about graffiti prevention and removal on your property.

How do I prevent graffiti on my property?
Maintain the appearance of your property
Neglecting your property's appearance may attract vandals, who think they can get away with tagging or marking up rundown and abandoned buildings. Repair broken fences, keep up your landscaping, and clean up any litter to show that you care about your property. A neat, clean street and neighbourhood helps to discourage graffiti vandals.

Plant vines or thorny plants in front of walls and fences
Graffiti vandals typically look for safe, easy targets to vandalise. Planting shrubs, trees and vines in front of walls and fences can make those targets hard to spray paint or mark up. Thorny plants like roses or bougainvillea are especially effective, since the graffiti vandals won't be able to get close without tearing their clothes or injuring themselves.

Invest in home security technology
Home security systems can help ward off graffiti vandals, as well as burglars. Install home security technology in visible places to deter potential offenders, and advertise its use through signage.

Keep the exterior of your property well-lit by installing motion-activated (sensor) lights. Vandals know that good lighting increases the chance of being caught and reported, which is why graffiti is much more common in dimly lit areas.

Finally, make it difficult for graffiti vandals to reach your walls and roof by installing locks, gates or fences. A wire-mech or cyclone fence is ideal, because they don't provide a flat surface for vandals to graffiti on.

Consider dark colours, murals or anti-graffiti coatings
Painting solid surfaces like walls and fences in dark colours can make your property less attractive to graffiti vandals, as the graffiti won't show up as well.

Alternatively, commission local artists to cover your surface with a beautiful artwork. A covered wall is much less inviting to graffiti artists, as it takes away the enticing 'blank canvas'.

Anti-graffiti surface coasting can also be applied over paintwork. They help you to easily wash off graffiti without damaging the paint and masonry underneath. Simply painting over graffiti could allow the graffiti to still show through, and you would be presenting a fresh canvas for the vandal.

How do I remove graffiti from my property?
Act quickly
In many cases, the more time the graffiti has to penetrate the surface of your property, the harder it will be to remove. Warmer weather speeds up the process, while colder weather slows it down.

Quickly removing graffiti can also help to deter repeat attacks, as the vandal will get much less recognition for tagging that spot than other area where their graffiti stays up for longer.

Graffiti also encourages other vandals to put their own tag up. Try to remove graffiti within 48 hours to discourage graffitist.

If you're out in public, you may find blue posters with QR codes around Melbourne that allow you to scan and report graffiti.

Contact your council for help
Residents and businesses are generally responsible for the removal of graffiti from their own properties. Many councils do offer free graffiti removal services, graffiti removals kits or paint discount vouchers in order to help their residents remove graffiti attacks from their properties. Offensive graffiti (defamatory or degrading words or graphics) will be prioritised for removal.

You should also report graffiti to your local police station, so the police have accurate statistics about the level of vandalism in the area. If you have any information on illegal graffiti offenses, you can anonymously call Crime Stoppers on 1800 333 000.

Use the right product to remove graffiti
Common graffiti removal products include liquid cleanser, hand washing detergent, liquid landry detergent, powder cleanser, over cleanser, turpentine and eucalyptus oil. Each of these products is highly effective when removing graffiti from glass or aluminium surfaces. Oven cleaner is best for removing graffiti from tiles or terrazzo, while liquid laundry detergent is best for concrete slab surfaces, and liquid cleanser on soft brick surfaces. Hard brick surfaces are the most difficult to remove graffiti from, but oven cleaner or powder cleanser are your best options.

Make sure to spot-test on the surface before cleaning. Using the wrong chemical could damage the surface you're trying to clean. You should also be cautious when using hard-bristled brushes or scourers: they're effective at removing graffiti but could damage sensitive surfaces.