

How to Replace a Garage Door

A Step-by-Step Guide for Builders

By Plain Builder Staff

A garage door is one of the hardest-working elements in any home — cycling thousands of times a year while taking the brunt of weather, wear, and daily use. When it's time for a replacement, the project can feel daunting. But with proper preparation and a methodical approach, it's well within the reach of a skilled builder.

We talked with industry professionals to walk through the full replacement process from start to finish.

Before You Start: Planning and Safety

The number one mistake we see is people jumping into a tear-out before they've measured properly or confirmed the new door specs. Garage door openings are rarely perfectly square, and a door that doesn't fit the rough opening is an expensive problem.

Gather these items before you begin:

- Tape measure, level, and framing square
- Safety glasses and work gloves — always
- Step ladder and a helper (two-person job at minimum)
- Cordless drill, socket set, and adjustable wrenches
- New garage door kit (panels, hardware, and springs)
- New door opener (if replacing)
- Weatherstripping and threshold seal
- C-clamps or locking pliers to secure the door during work

Torsion springs store extremely high tension and can snap with great force, causing severe injury or even death if handled improperly. If you are not highly experienced working with torsion springs, do not attempt to adjust or remove them—hire a professional. Extension springs on older doors are less hazardous but can still be dangerous and must be approached with caution.

STEP 1: Measure the Opening

Accurate measurements are the foundation of a successful replacement. Measure the width and height of the opening at multiple points — the opening can vary top to bottom and side to side. Record all of the following:

- Width: Measure across the top, middle, and bottom. Use the smallest measurement.
- Height: Measure from the floor to the top on both sides. Use



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whichever is smaller.

- Headroom: Distance from the top of the opening to the ceiling (minimum 10-12 inches for standard hardware; more for a high-lift or jackshaft opener).
- Side room: Minimum of 3.75 inches each side for track hardware.
- Depth: Garage depth for the horizontal track (minimum 18 inches beyond the door height).

Most standard residential doors come in widths of 8, 9, 10, 16, and 18 feet, and heights of 7 or 8 feet. Custom sizes are available, but add lead time and cost. If your opening is close to a standard size, it's usually worth shimming or trimming the rough opening to match a stock door.

STEP 2: Choose the Right Door

Garage doors come in several materials, each with trade-offs in cost, durability, maintenance, and appearance:

- Steel: Most popular; affordable and durable with low upkeep. It resists dents well when using at least 24-gauge



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steel. Choose single-, double-, or triple-layer construction to increase insulation and quiet operation. Strong performance in most climates, but it can rust if the finish is damaged.

- **Wood:** Classic appeal, often used for carriage-house styles. Delivers a warm, authentic look but requires ongoing maintenance, such as painting or staining, to resist weathering. Heavier than steel, which means heavier-duty hardware is needed. Wood is prone to rot and warping, especially in wet climates.
- **Wood composite:** Mimics real wood but resists moisture and warping better than solid wood. It requires less maintenance than wood and is a practical compromise between authentic curb appeal and durability. Not as rugged as steel, but usually lighter than pure wood doors.
- **Aluminum:** Lightweight and resists rust, making it ideal for humid or coastal locations. Easier to lift than steel or wood, but not as resistant to dents from impacts. Best fit for areas where corrosion is a concern, and the risk of impact damage is low.
- **Molded Fiberglass:** Light and impervious to rust or rot, with paint-holding ability for custom looks. The molded technique is the same used in the automotive industry, Corvette's being an excellent example. Molded fiberglass is highly impact resistant and can be molded to closely recreate wood doors. Molded fiberglass has a long lifespan. The main drawback

would be price which is similar to a high end wood door.

Don't overlook the R-value. An insulated door makes a considerable difference in an attached garage — it keeps the space more comfortable year-round and can reduce energy costs in the adjacent living areas. For Minnesota winters, we generally recommend R-16 or higher.

STEP 3: **Remove the Old Door**

With your new door on order and tools assembled, it's time to remove the old one. Work carefully and methodically:

1. Disconnect the opener. Unplug the automatic opener and manually disengage it from the door by pulling the emergency release cord.
2. Secure the door. With the door fully closed, clamp locking pliers or C-clamps to the track just below the bottom roller on each side to prevent the door from flying up while you work.
3. Release spring tension carefully. For torsion springs, use proper winding bars to unwind the tension — NEVER use screwdrivers or improvised tools. For extension springs, open the door fully to relieve tension before disconnecting. If in doubt, call a pro.
4. Disconnect the cables. Once springs are fully released, disconnect the lift cables from the bottom brackets on each side.
5. Remove rollers and panels. Working from the top panel down, remove the bolts connecting the hinges and brackets. Have your helper support each panel as you disconnect it. Set panels aside flat to avoid cracking.
6. Remove the tracks. Unbolt the vertical and horizontal tracks from the wall and ceiling. Keep hardware organized if any components will be reused.
7. Remove the torsion bar or spring assembly. Once fully unloaded and disconnected, slide the bar out and remove the entire spring system.



PHOTO COURTESY OF INTERGRITY OVERHEAD DOOR.

EXPERT INSIGHTS FROM:

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- Shiv Dass, American Garage Door Factory - (715) 630-6616 - mrshivdass@yahoo.com <https://www.americangaragedoorfactory.com/>

STEP 4:

Inspect and Prepare the Opening

Before installing the new door, take time to inspect the rough opening thoroughly.

- Check the header beam for rot, cracking, or sag. A compromised header must be repaired or sistered before proceeding.
- Inspect the jamb framing for squareness. Out-of-plumb jambs will cause the new door to bind or seal poorly.
- Remove old weatherstripping, hardware anchors, and any corroded fasteners.
- Treat any wood showing signs of moisture damage with a

wood hardener before reframing.

- Install new door stop molding on the jambs if the old stop is damaged.

Installers see rotted headers more often than you might think — especially in older homes with no overhang above the garage. It's worth pulling the trim and really looking at that framing. A new door on a bad header won't last, and fixing it later costs twice as much.

STEP 5:

Install the New Door Panels

Every manufacturer's installation manual is slightly different,



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but the general process follows these steps:

1. Install the bottom bracket and weatherstrip. Attach the bottom bracket assembly to the lowest panel. Nail or staple the bottom weatherstrip to the underside of the bottom panel.
2. Set the first panel. Place the bottom panel in the opening, centered left-to-right. Use shims if needed to level it. Clamp it to the jambs temporarily.
3. Install vertical track sections. Attach the vertical track brackets to the jambs and slide the track over the rollers on the bottom panel. Do not fully tighten yet.
4. Add subsequent panels. Stack each panel on top of the previous one, connecting them with hinges. Insert rollers into the track as you go. Each hinge connects two adjacent panels — follow the manufacturer's hinge placement guide exactly.
5. Install the top section. The top panel often has a special top fixture bracket for the lift cable. Attach per the manual.
6. Align and tighten the tracks. With all panels in place, check that both vertical tracks are plumb and the door is centered. Tighten all mounting bolts once alignment is confirmed.

STEP 6:

Install the Horizontal Track and Header Bracket

The horizontal track carries the door panels as they travel overhead. Proper installation is critical for smooth operation:

- Attach the horizontal track sections to the curved sections at the top of each vertical track.
- Hang the track from the ceiling using the angle iron and lag bolts included in the kit. Ceiling strapping should be installed every 4-6 feet along the track.
- Ensure the horizontal track has a slight upward pitch toward

the rear — typically 1/4 inch of rise per foot. This helps the door 'park' fully open without sagging.

- Mount the header bracket centered above the opening on the face of the header. This anchors the spring system and the opener trolley rail.

STEP 7:

Install the Spring System

Spring installation is the most technically demanding—and dangerous—part of the job. Torsion springs store potentially deadly amounts of tension and can cause serious injury if not handled with specialized knowledge and tools. If you have never installed or tensioned a torsion spring, stop and hire a professional. The savings are not worth the risk of an emergency room visit or permanent injury.

For those with experience and the proper tools:

- Torsion springs: Slide the spring(s) onto the torsion bar. Mount the center bearing plate and secure the bar. Attach the cable drums to each end, run the lift cables from the bottom brackets up and around the drums, and tension the springs using proper winding bars — follow the manufacturer's turn count based on door height and weight.
- Extension springs: Mount one end of each spring to the rear track hanger and the other to the front bracket via a safety cable. The safety cable must thread through the spring to catch it if it breaks.

STEP 8:

Test the Door and Make Adjustments

With the spring system installed, do a manual test before connecting the opener:

1. Balance test. Manually raise the door to waist height and let go. A properly balanced door should hold position, neither rising nor falling. If it drifts, the spring tension needs adjustment.
2. Check for binding. Operate the door slowly through its full travel. It should move smoothly with no scraping, grinding, or catching. Confirm all rollers are seated in the track.
3. Inspect gaps. With the door fully closed, check the seal along the sides, top, and bottom. Adjust stop molding and track position as needed for a weather-tight fit.
4. Lubricate. Apply a garage door-specific lubricant (not WD-40) to the rollers, hinges, springs, and tracks. Lehman recommends a lithium-based spray lubricant applied every 6-12 months.

STEP 9:

Install or Reconnect the Opener

If you're installing a new opener or reconnecting the existing one:

- Mount the trolley rail to the header bracket and attach the motor unit to the ceiling per the opener manufacturer's instructions.

- Connect the trolley arm to the top of the door using the bracket hardware provided.
- Program the safety reversal system and test it: place a 2x4 flat on the floor in the door's path and close it — the door must reverse upon contact.
- Adjust the open and close travel limits so the door fully seals at the bottom and clears properly at the top.
- Install the safety sensors at the base of each track and align them so the LED indicators show solid (not blinking).
- Mount the wall button and program remote transmitters and keypads per the manual.

Modern openers have gotten quite good. Battery backup models are worth the upgrade in areas with frequent power outages. And if you're doing a full door replacement, it's the perfect time to add a keypad if you don't have one.

STEP 10: **Finishing Touches and Ongoing Maintenance**

- A new door is an investment — protect it with regular upkeep:
- Install or replace trim molding around the exterior of the opening for a finished look and to shed water away from the frame.
 - Apply exterior-grade caulk where the door frame meets the

siding.

- Lubricate all moving parts every 6-12 months.
- Visually inspect springs, cables, and rollers twice a year. Replace worn rollers — nylon rollers are quieter and longer-lasting than steel.
- Test the opener's safety reversal monthly.
- Touch up paint on steel doors as soon as chips appear to prevent rust.

Know When to Call a Pro

A competent builder can handle most of this project. But springs and cables are the exception. We also see a lot of calls after someone installs a door that's not right for the opening — wrong weight rating, wrong spring size, undersized opener. A \$150 consultation before you start can save you thousands.

Consider calling a professional for:

- Any work involving torsion or extension spring tension
- Custom-size or commercial-grade door installations
- Situations where the rough opening needs structural repair
- Smart home integrations or commercial-grade opener installations
- Warranty activation — some manufacturers require professional installation **PB**

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