

Why a Synthetic Cedar Shake Roof Outperforms Natural Wood in Austin's Climate

The Trouble with Natural Cedar Shakes in Central Texas

I have spent the better part of two decades repairing and replacing roofs across Austin and the surrounding Hill Country. One thing I have learned is that natural cedar shake roofs, while beautiful, simply do not hold up here. The combination of intense UV exposure, high humidity, and sudden hailstorms turns cedar shakes into a maintenance headache within a few years. They split, curl, and rot. By year five, a cedar shake roof often leaks around the fasteners. By year ten, you are looking at a full replacement. That is why more homeowners and builders in Texas are turning to a synthetic cedar shake roof instead.

A synthetic cedar shake roof mimics the look of natural cedar but uses engineered materials that resist the specific stresses of our climate. The most reliable systems I have worked with come from DaVinci Roofscapes, a manufacturer that focuses on impact-resistant roofing. Their products are not a thin imitation. They are thick, dense panels that carry a Class 4 impact rating, the highest residential rating available under the UL 2218 impact test. That means they can take a direct hit from a two-inch hailstone traveling at highway speed and still remain weathertight.

What Makes a Synthetic Cedar Shake Roof Different

To understand why a [synthetic cedar shake roof](#) works, you have to look at the materials. Natural cedar shakes are milled from wood. They absorb moisture, expand and contract with temperature swings, and provide almost no impact resistance. Synthetic shakes, on the other hand, are molded from polyurethane or fiberglass-reinforced composites. DaVinci Roofscapes uses a polyurethane shake formulation that is poured into molds taken from real hand-split cedar shakes. The result is a texture and grain pattern that is nearly indistinguishable from natural wood, but without the vulnerability.

DaVinci offers two main product lines for the synthetic shake look: DaVinci Bellaforte and DaVinci Spartan. Bellaforte is their synthetic slate product, but for the cedar shake aesthetic, you want the Spartan line. Spartan shakes are Class 4 impact-rated and carry a Class A fire rating, which is the best possible rating for fire resistance. That matters in Texas, where wildfire risk is real, especially in the wildland-urban interface west of Austin. A natural cedar shake roof, by contrast, is a fire hazard. Many insurance companies in wildfire-prone areas will not even insure a wood shake roof anymore.

Real-World Performance in Austin

I recently supervised the installation of a DaVinci Spartan synthetic cedar shake roof on a custom home in the Westlake area. The homeowner had originally wanted natural cedar shakes for the look, but after I walked them through the maintenance requirements and the risk of hail damage, they agreed to go synthetic. The roof has been through two hail seasons now, including one storm that dropped golf-ball-size hail. The shakes show no cracks, no dents, and no granule loss. The natural cedar shake roof on the neighbor's house had to be tarped after that same storm.

The 50-year warranty that DaVinci offers on its synthetic roofing products is not just marketing. It is a reflection of the material's durability. The warranty covers manufacturing defects and, when installed by an authorized installer such as Austin Roofing Company, it also covers the integrity of the weathertight seal. That seal is critical because even the best shake material will leak if the underlayment or flashing is not properly installed. A synthetic shake roof is only as good as the crew that puts it down.

Installation Nuances

Installing a synthetic cedar shake roof requires a different approach than natural cedar. Natural shakes are nailed directly to open sheathing with a gap between each shake to allow for expansion. Synthetic shakes are installed over a solid deck with a waterproof underlayment. The shakes themselves are fastened with ring-shank nails or screws, and the overlaps are tighter. The result is a roof that is essentially a continuous waterproof membrane with the shakes acting as an armor layer.

One detail that matters in Austin is the high wind warranty. DaVinci offers a high wind warranty on their synthetic shake systems when installed to their specifications. That means the roof is designed to withstand uplift forces from straight-line winds and the occasional tornado. Natural cedar shakes, even when properly nailed, can peel off in high winds because the wood splits around the nail heads. Synthetic shakes hold the fastener better because the material is denser and more uniform.

Another benefit I have observed is the weight. A synthetic cedar shake roof weighs about the same as a natural cedar shake roof, so you do not need to reinforce the structure. But unlike wood, synthetic shakes do not absorb water, so their weight does not increase after a rainstorm. That keeps the structural load consistent, which is easier on the framing over the long term.

Cost Considerations and Trade-Offs

Let me be honest about cost. A synthetic cedar shake roof is more expensive upfront than asphalt shingles or metal standing seam. It is roughly comparable to premium synthetic slate

or high-end concrete tile. But compared to natural cedar shakes, the synthetic option is often cheaper over the life of the roof, because you will not be replacing it in ten to fifteen years. The 50-year warranty on the DaVinci product is not a guarantee that the roof will last fifty years without any maintenance, but it does indicate the manufacturer's confidence. You will still need to inspect flashings, clean gutters, and reseal penetrations periodically. But the shakes themselves will not rot, warp, or lose their color.

Color retention is another area where synthetic shakes excel. Natural cedar fades to gray within a year or two. Some people like that weathered look, but if you want the warm brown or weathered wood tone to stay consistent, synthetic is the better choice. DaVinci colors are UV-stable and carry a long-term color warranty.

Is It Right for Your Home?

If you are building or re-roofing a home in Austin, and you want the look of a cedar shake roof without the drawbacks, a synthetic cedar shake roof is worth serious consideration. It is especially suited for homes in hail-prone areas, wildfire-risk zones, or locations with high wind exposure. The Class 4 impact rating and Class A fire rating give it a safety edge that natural wood cannot match.

That said, synthetic roofing is not for every budget or every architectural style. If your home is a rustic cabin with a deliberately rough finish, natural cedar might still be the right aesthetic choice. But for a modern custom home or a historic reproduction where you want the look to last, synthetic shakes deliver performance that natural wood simply cannot.

As a roofing contractor who works with both natural and synthetic materials, I have come to prefer synthetic shake for most projects in Central Texas. The combination of impact resistance, fire safety, and low maintenance is hard to beat. And when you factor in the 50-year warranty and the high wind warranty, the value proposition becomes clear. If you are working with a qualified installer like Austin Roofing Company, you can expect a roof that will protect your home for decades with minimal fuss.

In my experience, homeowners who choose a synthetic cedar shake roof rarely regret it. The ones who go with natural cedar often wish they had listened to the advice to go synthetic. That is not just professional bias. It is the accumulated evidence of watching roofs age in a climate that is hard on every material.