

# Having a blast

Sodablasting is the latest method of stripping paint or antifouling from your hull. And it's arguably the quickest and cleanest way of doing so, says Toby Hodges



It all started with an article I saw in *Yachting Monthly* last year,' said John Varney, UK founder of Sodablast, a builder and property developer by trade who had recently bought a Legend 41. Having read that bicarbonate of soda was being used for 'blasting' in America, he became interested in its applications and flew to Houston, Texas, to see the firm, before setting up a UK and European franchise himself.

Sodablasting has been used in America for six years – mostly for paint-stripping – but its application is limitless, from cars, trucks, planes and machinery, to cleaning graffiti, masonry and fire damage.

Since John set up Sodablast UK, he has targeted the marine industry, but has been contracted for various work, from stone cleaning to renovating oak beams. One early job was to strip an old Bentley car after the owner gave up trying to do it by hand!

## HOW DOES IT WORK?

Soda crystals are similar to the food-grade soda we are familiar with, but it's not quite the same as the soda used for domestic purposes. The granules have irregular surfaces that explode on impact (regardless of the angle they strike), agitating

the paint and removing it from its bonded structure.

Soda crystals are softer than most materials, including metal, glass, plastic and aluminium, so won't damage them. Used professionally, it won't damage GRP, either – yet if it is used too close it's capable of pitting, or even penetrating, GRP. A big plus with Sodablasting is the time-saving element – you don't have to mask up the areas around because it doesn't matter if it gets into all nooks and crannies.

## THE RIG

Sodablasting works on the same principle as slurry (grit/sand) or ice-blasting – using a compressor to provide pressure to shoot the crystals at the surface and 'shock' the paint away from a hull. The compressor engine can be diesel (for a mobile unit) or electric if it's stationary and the compressor is capable of 10-bar pressure. A condenser tank and two large fans take the moisture out of the air to prevent any clog-ups. The second tank holds 50kg (two bags) of bicarbonate of soda, which will provide two hours of blasting.

Water is used to reduce dust, plus there is a water hose attached to the main nozzle to diffuse the soda by about 10% (using pure soda crystals is the most efficient means, but creates dust). Tents can be rigged around the working area, plus disposable absorbent mats for loose antifouling.



ABOVE: The whole rig sits on a mobile trailer. LEFT: Ultra-fine soda crystals



## BLASTING

The hose pressure is capable of going up to 160psi but Sodablast UK has found that 70psi is the optimum operating pressure for use on GRP (to strip up to six coats of antifoul) – unless the coating is badly ingrained. Pressure washers operate at between 4,000-12,000psi and use hundreds of litres of water per minute. The nozzle is held about 70cm away (judged by the operator). Where slurry-blasting makes metals rusty by impregnating the oxidation, sodablasting totally removes it, so the metal retains its metallic gleam for weeks.

We saw a demonstration of Sodablast in action on a 29ft glassfibre RIB – and while there was only a very thin layer of antifouling to remove, it only took an hour and half to strip back to gelcoat. A yacht would probably take between a half day and full day to strip properly, including tenting and cleaning up.

**Pros:** Bicarbonate of soda is water soluble and totally environmentally friendly – (add oil and you get soap) – so the only waste product is the paint. The crystals are kinder and cleaner than slurry-blasting methods – leaving less debris. Quick, clean and green – and comparatively economic.

**Cons:** Pressure is its worst enemy – powerful enough to easily raise the grain on softwood (so not applicable for this) it can damage GRP if used incorrectly, it will also anodise aluminium.

**Guide price:** From £15 per foot  
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