

## Hit the Deck!

### – Cleaning and Maintenance of Outside Decks –

#### Everyday Care

It doesn't take much work to keep your wooden deck looking good. Proper care keeps it in tip-top shape. Regularly remove dirt, mildew, and tannin (plant) stains to help wood last longer and look better longer. Keep debris from collecting in the gaps and joints. This allows the wood to stay dry by exposing it to the sun and air. Otherwise, pressure-treated wood may darken and mildew while other woods may rot and eventually require replacement.

---

*Occasionally sweep or hose foliage and other large debris off your deck.*

*Remember. . . the longer that sticks and decaying leaves sit on the wood surface, the more chance they have to stain and rot the wood.*

---

Twice a year, lightly scrub your deck using a solution of warm water and a few squirts of liquid dishwashing detergent and a stiff-bristle brush. Check with a home improvement store for a deck brush with a broom handle so you don't have to do this on your hands and knees. Every two years or so, give your deck a more thorough cleaning. You can use a two-step scrubbing method or, if you're handy with tools, you can power-spray.

#### Option 1: Two-Step Scrubbing Method

This process is usually less expensive than hiring a professional or renting a power

sprayer, which can be hard to handle without damaging the wood. Although this method utilizes chemicals, such as trisodium phosphate, liquid household bleach and oxalic acid, they will not hurt your lawn or plants if used correctly.

#### You will need . . .

- 1 cup trisodium phosphate (TSP) - (This is available at hardware stores and is used to remove surface soil and sticky stuff)
- 1 cup liquid household bleach - (This is used to remove mildew.)
- 1 gallon water

---

*An idea to consider . . . a phosphate-free alternative to trisodium phosphate is a product that contains sodium metasilicate, such as TSP-PF, available at hardware stores.*

---

Add TSP and bleach to water and mix thoroughly. Use deck brush to scrub wood surface. Rinse thoroughly with a garden hose. Your deck is clean, but you may still have some wood darkening or discoloration as a result of weathering or the accumulation of tannins. To remove these stains, clean with oxalic acid or a deck cleaner. Both products are available at hardware stores or stores that sell wood deck supplies.

To clean with the oxalic acid, fill a plastic bucket or other non-metallic container with one gallon of hot water. Then add one-half cup of the oxalic acid crystals to the water and wait until completely dissolved. Apply

the solution to the deck using a mop or sponge. Do not scrub, but simply coat the wood and let it sit for 20 to 30 minutes. Rinse well with a garden hose.

Before using oxalic acid, remove any potted plants from the area and cover any other plants that could be splashed with the solution. It can burn foliage. However, the solution that you're rinsing off the deck will be diluted enough that it won't harm the surrounding plants. Use mineral spirits to remove sap from unfinished wood.

=====

**Safety Caution:** *Wear rubber gloves, goggles and other protective clothing when working with any chemicals, such as TSP, bleach or oxalic acid.*

=====

### **Option 2: Power Spray Cleaning**

A high-pressure water sprayer quickly cleans all gaps around posts and steps, up against the house, and between the boards. However, you can take the finish off the wood if you're not careful! An inexperienced person can actually cut grooves into the wood and damage the wood by applying too much pressure. You can rent a power sprayer at an equipment rental shop. Other effective options include using an air compressor and nozzle which is safer and easy to use or using a leaf blower. Keep in mind that you can also hire a professional.

### **Tips for do-it-yourself power-spray cleaning . . .**

Here are some tips for preventing damage as you clean your deck:

1. Don't use too much pressure! Many power sprayers available from rental companies offer water pressure of 3000 pounds per square inch or higher. You don't want that! You need only between 800 to 1200 pounds per square inch to accomplish the cleaning.
2. Use a 45-degree nozzle instead of a needle or pinpoint nozzle.
3. Hold the nozzle at an angle – 12 to 18

inches away from the deck surface.

4. Don't concentrate the nozzle in one area for more than a split second. Keep the spray constantly moving.

Always read instructions for proper use and safety precautions before operating a power sprayer. Wear goggles and other protective clothing when operating a power sprayer.

### **About Wood Finishes . . .**

Decks take a great deal of abuse from rain, snow, wind and sun. Although you can't change the weather, you can prolong the life of your deck by applying a finish. Ideally, wooden decks should be refinished in the fall, if needed, and kept clear of snow and ice during the winter.

Before applying a finish, clean the deck's surface. If you're working on a deck that has already been finished with a sealer, sand off any glossiness using a stiff fiber brush and a mild detergent. Otherwise, the wood won't absorb the finish. Rinse well and allow to dry.

Time your work to avoid direct sunlight when applying the finish. Don't apply a finish if rain is expected within 24 hours.

Allow enough time to complete the job, which depends upon your basic mechanical skills and your speed. For an 8' x 10' deck, time estimates range from 4 hours for an experienced person to 8 hours for a beginner.

### **What you need . . .**

You already have many of the tools around your home. Before starting, gather together the items you'll need, such as a broom, sander, sandpaper, rubber gloves and safety goggles.

You have options for applying the finish. A paint brush will take longer than either a standard roller or an airless sprayer. However, a brush is easier for some people

to work with. Many professionals use an airless sprayer. Although it's fast and easy to use, be sure to protect the siding of the house and the ground underneath in case of overspray. Also, choose a day with little or no breeze. It's wise to start by spraying the understructure of the deck first. This gives you a chance to learn the technique before doing the more conspicuous upper side.

You have two choices for penetrating materials for finishes – sealers and stains. *Sealers* are transparent unless you buy a pigmented sealer. They prevent wood from absorbing water and delay the effects of weathering. Select one with a mildewcide to prevent mildew and rot. *Stains* both color and seal the wood. They're useful for covering up the green tinge of pressure-treated lumber. Semi-transparent stains tint the wood but allow the wood grain to show. Solid-color stains can be as opaque as paint.

Here are some basic differences between sealers and stains you should recognize before deciding which one to purchase:

1. Sealers are clear whereas stains are semitransparent or opaque and have a range of colors.
2. Depending on exposure to sun and water, sealers should last 2 to 3 years. Stains, on the other hand, will last 3 to 5 years with solid colors lasting up to 10 years.
3. Both dry in about 24 hours in 75 degree weather. Sealers get tacky and can be touched in about 30 minutes, but stains need at least 3 to 4 hours. Allow surfaces to dry thoroughly...at least 24 hours before really using the area.
4. While one coat of sealer should be sufficient, two coats of stain are needed especially for porous surfaces.
5. Use mineral spirits or paint thinner for cleaning stains from sealers or solvents. Use water to clean latex stains.

## Enjoy . . .

After you have your furniture cleaned and ready to go and your deck repaired, you're set to enjoy the warm weather, entertain or just sit on the deck and read.

---

### References:

- Complete Patio Book, Sunset Books, Inc., Menlo Park, CA. 1998.
- Deck and Patio Upgrades. Monsanto Company. The Solaris Group, San Ramon, CA 94583. 1991.
- The Home Depot Outdoor Projects 1-2-3, Ben Allen, editor. Meredith Publishing, Des Moines, IA. 1998.
- Patios and Decks. Lane Publishing Company, Menlo Park, CA 94025. 1988.

---

Linda Adler, M.A.  
Extension Specialist for Home Furnishings

Deck Care.wpd  
9/2004 (Rev.)

Educational programs of Kentucky Cooperative Extension serve all people regardless of race, color, age, sex, religion, disability, or national origin.