

# Deck Demo

## RAILS



**Cut the railing.** Cut a few inches from where the railing meets the post so that you don't hit any nails, leaving a stub of railing on the post. Clear the debris as you work so that you don't trip.



**Don't unbolt—just cut.** A pruning blade in a reciprocating saw makes fast work of cutting the railing posts free from the deck.

It is almost inevitable that before you can begin building a new deck, an existing and usually decrepit deck that is standing in the way has to be removed. No part of demolition is glamorous. The best you can hope for is efficiency and safety. The faster the old deck comes down, the sooner you can start building the new one.

On exactly one occasion, I was able to back a dump trailer directly beneath a small raised deck, drop the deck precisely into the trailer, and haul it away in under five minutes. On every other occasion in my career, I have had to dismantle the deck in a methodical manner and carry the debris to the Dumpster.

### Plan ahead

If the Dumpster is not at the job site when you begin, you'll end up handling all the debris twice; you'll have to stack everything somewhere and transfer it later to the Dumpster. Call far in advance to make sure the Dumpster is on-site when you need it.

Next, have the tools you need at hand. I rely on several specialized tools to make quick work of deck demolition. While a good old-fashioned crowbar gets the job done, tools designed for this purpose are usually superior. In no particular order, the tools I have used are the Gutster, the Duckbill Deck Wrecker, and the Demo-Dek. Spending \$50 to \$150 on a specialized tool is a no-brainer if you have a significant amount of work ahead of you.

I also rely on a flat bar, a circular saw, a reciprocating saw, a chainsaw, and an impact driver to get through an average demolition job. While I typically use old blades in my circular saw in case I hit nails, I try to use fresh, aggressively toothed wood blades in my reciprocating saw. Pruning blades work great; just don't hit any nails or you'll burn through a lot of blades. Chainsaws make even quicker work of cutting off railings, beams, and big sections of deck. Again, watch carefully for nails. Not only will they instantly dull the chain, but the chain can fling the nails back toward you.

# 101

## How to demolish an old deck safely and efficiently

BY GREG DIBERNARDO

### DECKING



**Quick and safe board removal.** When headed to the Dumpster, instead of bending over nails or pulling them out, carry two boards together with the protruding nails facing each other.

**Two tools tear up the decking.** The Gutster lifts up the first few rows of decking by prying against adjacent decking (left). Once enough decking is out of the way, the Duckbill Deck Wrecker can be used to pop the other boards up while allowing you to stand on firm decking (right).

#### Begin with the railings

Remove the railing in sections, cutting it free with a chainsaw or a reciprocating saw. The freed section should be small enough to carry. If the rail system's balusters are nailed to the rim joists, cut the balusters flush to the deck surface, and then cut the upper rail into manageable sections, leaving the balusters attached to the upper rail. If the balusters are not nailed securely into the rim, kick them off with your boot instead of cutting. Next, cut the rail posts off the rim joists. Don't unbolt posts; it's a waste of time when cutting is so much faster.

#### Off with the decking

There are two approaches to removing decking. Which you choose depends on the construction of the deck and whether you want to salvage the deck boards. On decks with decking nailed perpendicular to the joists, it's easy to rip the boards off using one of the decking-removal tools. Before pulling off the boards, though, measure the

length of the Dumpster. If necessary, cut the boards while they are still in place so they fit in the Dumpster. Cutting them after removal is a real pain, not to mention a hazard because of the protruding fasteners.

Remove decking carefully that's to be salvaged. Once a board is free, flip it over on the joists, drive the nails through the boards, and pull them out. You can toss the nails into a bucket as you go, or just drop them on the ground and pick them up later with a rolling magnet.

If the deck boards are installed diagonally to the joists, or with screws that hold tenaciously, it is often easier and faster to cut the decking between every joist. I use a chainsaw, but a circular saw works, too. Just don't stand on decking you've cut loose. Remove the joists with the decking still fastened, and toss the assembly into the Dumpster.

#### Tear down the framing

Once you have stripped the decking, use a reciprocating saw to cut the joists near the ledger as close to the joist hangers as possible. Leave

## RIM JOIST



**Just beat it.** Sometimes the solution really is to use a bigger hammer. A sledge can make quick work of removing a rim joist, which is often held in place only by nails driven into the end grain of the joists.

the two outermost joists for last so that they can stabilize the beam. Most joists are simply toenailed to the beam. After cutting a joist at the ledger, dropping it should lever the nails out from the beam easily. If the nails don't pop right out, twisting the joist around should do the trick. On a low deck, it can be easier to pry the joists off the beam first and then use the joist to lever itself free of the hangers on the ledger.

If the joists on a high deck connect to the beam with hurricane ties, it is safest to use a cat's paw to remove the nails holding the connectors to the beam before removing the joists from the ledger. On a lower deck with hurricane ties, you can pry the joists off the beam using one of the decking-removal tools.

The joists are what prevent the deck beam and posts from falling over. This is particularly important with decks that are higher off the ground. A deck beam can weigh hundreds of pounds, and an uncontrolled fall can be dangerous. When removing the two outermost joists, control the beam so that it falls where you want it.

Posts supporting beams that are more than a couple of feet off the ground usually provide long-enough levers that toppling over the beam will pull the posts free of any hardware attaching them to the footings. There may not be enough leverage with lower beams, and you'll need to pull the nails from the hardware that holds the posts to the footings. With the beam on the ground, cut or lever the

## JOISTS



**Remove joists in a two-step process.** On a low deck like this, pry each joist off the beam (above), and then lever the other end out of the joist hanger attached to the ledger (inset).

posts free, cut the beam into sections, and safely carry each piece to the Dumpster.

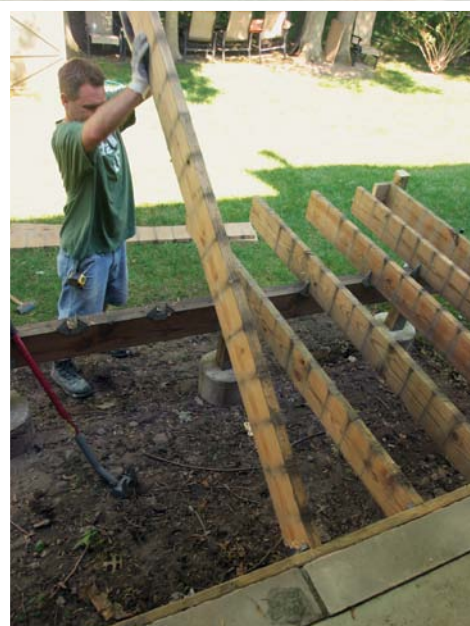
Remove ledgers with care. It is the one connection I unbolt instead of cut. That said, many older ledgers are simply nailed in place. In those cases, I dig out the nails with a cat's paw. It's good to have a helper hold the ledger when you're removing the last fasteners, particularly if you're working off a ladder. Safety is the obvious reason, but it's not the only one. When there's just one fastener left, the ledger can rotate on it. The end falling down is probably OK, but the other end will torque upward and can damage the house's siding.

### Abandon the footings

I typically leave concrete footings in place, reusing them only when I can verify that they are able to handle the new load. This takes digging down alongside the footing to its bottom. If a footing has to go, remove it by a combination of digging, chipping, and lifting. Sometimes you can dig partway down around a footing, wrap a chain around it, and yank it out of the ground using a high-lift jack. Once out of the ground, footings can be rolled to the Dumpster. I use a gas-powered masonry cutoff saw to slice them into more manageable pieces. □

Greg DiBernardo owns Peachtree Decks and Porches in Alpharetta, Ga. Photos by Andy Engel, except where noted.

## BEAM



**Pull nails only when necessary.** A taller deck's longer posts would have levered out of the post bases. In this case, the hardware's nails had to be pulled using a cat's paw.

**Don't carry too heavy a load.** While it's tempting to carry big chunks to the Dumpster, it's sometimes better to cut things into smaller pieces and save your back for building the new deck.



## Ordering a Dumpster

Priced accordingly, Dumpsters come in several sizes; most common are ones that can hold 10, 20, 30, and 40 cu. yd. Online sources suggest that a 10-yd. Dumpster is adequate for a 250-sq.-ft. deck teardown, and that a 20-yd. Dumpster will handle up to 400 sq. ft. of old deck. You'll need a bigger one if it

will also take the construction debris generated by building a new deck in its place.

A 10-yd. Dumpster costs less than a 20-yarder, but it may only be 12 ft. long as opposed to about 22 ft. long. Longer Dumpsters mean that boards can be packed in without having to be cut first, so a larger Dumpster may be worth the extra cost. That said, sometimes a larger Dumpster can't be placed close to the deck.

Moreover, it might block the driveway or take up space needed for material delivery.

Call several vendors to check prices and schedules. If the supplier won't leave the Dumpster for more than a few days without charging demurrage, a smaller one at each phase of the job might cost less than a single large one. Be there when it is delivered so that it ends up where you want it. When deciding where

to place the Dumpster, look up. Because the truck tilts up to load and unload, overhead power lines and large tree branches can limit placement.

Pack the Dumpster like you're playing Tetris, and you'll fit more in than if you throw the deck sections in willy-nilly. You can save space by reusing the lumber for bracing, concrete forms, landscape projects, or maybe even a tree house.