

Cedar-Deck

A good cleaning and a quick refinish give new life to a weather-beaten deck

BY JIM GRANT

Although I started out as a carpenter, I've found that restoring decks is a really good niche in San Diego. In our beautiful climate, decks are an extension of the home, adding square footage and creating natural gathering spaces, perfect for entertaining and taking in Pacific views. Because they use them so often, people want their decks to look good, but sun and everything from pool chemicals to potted plants take their toll on a deck's surface and framing. Although these things can affect the longevity of a deck, regular maintenance helps keep the problems in check. In Southern California, well-constructed and well-maintained

decks can last 20 or 30 years. Neglected ones can rot away in as few as five. It's my job to make decks look good and last.

When I start talking to prospective clients about a deck restoration, the first question I get is often, "What coating is best?" I like penetrating oil finishes because they protect the wood below the surface and they're easier to apply than film finishes—but the coating is only part of the equation. If you don't remove the old finish and restore the lumber, the new coating will look bad and won't last. In our sunny climate, most softwood decks will need to be cleaned and recoated every 20 to 26 months. Hardwood decks require even more attention

GIVE IT A GOOD CLEAN...

Successfully refinishing a deck starts with washing away dirt, mold, and algae. Aggressive pressure-washing can damage deck boards, so use deck-specific cleaning products and stiff-bristle scrub brushes to get the job done.



Mix a batch of cleaner. One gallon of wood-brightening cleaner and 4 gal. of water make 5 gal. of cleaner, which is enough to clean about 400 sq. ft. of decking. Adding 1 oz. of oxalic acid crystals per gal. of water makes the solution better at brightening weather-beaten wood.



Apply the cleaner, let it work. Although a garden sprayer works, it can be tedious to constantly pump. Instead, I apply the cleaner with an electric-powered agricultural sprayer so it fully coats the deck surface and railings. For more on this setup, visit FineHomebuilding.com/magazine.



Protect metal. The cleaner and oxalic acid can etch metal, including aluminum-clad windows and doors, so protect them with plastic sheeting or cardboard. The cleaner can also leave water spots on glass if allowed to dry, so rinse any overspray off of windows and doors as soon as possible.

Rescue



Scrub work. Allow the cleaner to work for about 15 minutes before scrubbing the deck surface with a stiff-bristle brush. Scrub with the grain to avoid scratches.



Finish with a light rinse. After scrubbing, rinse the deck surface with a pressure washer equipped with a 40° tip. The wide nozzle won't damage wood fibers like more aggressive tips. Start at the house and work toward the edge, pushing the dirt as you move.

...AND THEN A FRESH FINISH

Unlike film finishes, oil-based penetrating finishes won't peel as they age. When it's time for a recoat, the prep is faster and easier too, because you don't have to fully strip the old finish—the surface just has to be clean and free of mold.



Sand rough spots. Sanding the whole deck is unnecessary, but split or checked boards should be sanded to prevent painful splinters. Ensure fasteners are driven below the deck surface before sanding.



Start at the top. Vertical surfaces and anything above the deck get coated before moving to the deck surface. A small airless sprayer is great for coating railings, but once the coating is sprayed, work it into the surface and absorb any excess with a painting pad.



Stir and mix the stain. Stir the cans of stain individually and then mix the cans together in a bucket to ensure even coloring throughout the deck surface.



Cut in. Use a brush or painting pad to cut in along the house and anywhere else at risk of overspray from the airless sprayer used for the rest of the deck. I prefer a pad because it holds more finish than a brush.

because the coating doesn't penetrate the dense wood as well. These need a clean and recoat every 12 to 14 months. Of course, it's hard to say exactly how long a deck coating will last. Decks around pools and BBQs and those in full sun will require more frequent maintenance. Roof-covered decks last the longest. You can tell a deck is ready to be refinished when the color or finish is faded or dusty, or water soaks into the boards rather than beading on the surface.

Absent or leaking gutters and incorrectly adjusted sprinklers accelerate rot, mold, and algae growth. Our climate is a gardener's dream, but potted plants on decks are a problem, because the deck boards

and framing underneath are constantly wet from watering. I tell my clients to keep their plants on stands so the deck stays dry (see "Built-in Cedar Plant Stand" at FineHomebuilding.com/magazine).

This 16-year-old Alaskan-cedar deck had some rot limited to a couple areas under the roof's drip line, so it made sense to repair it, but some decks are too far gone to fix. When repairs cost more than half of the cost of a new deck, I advise clients to replace it, because the frame is most likely compromised. □

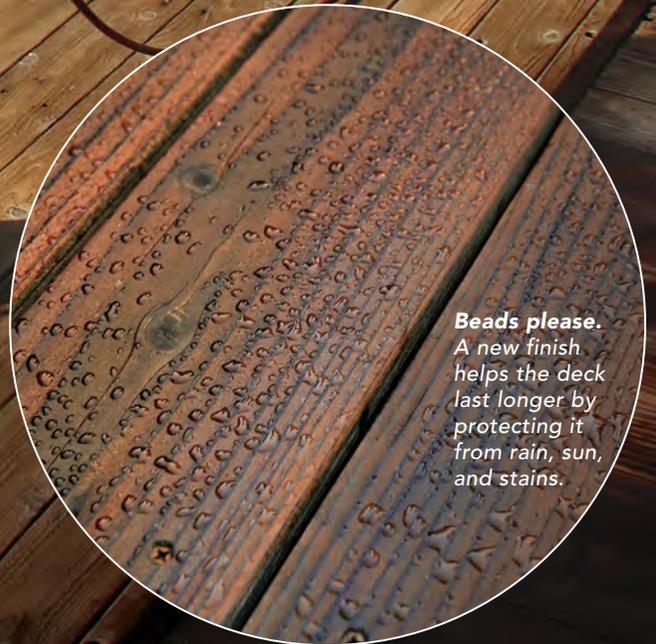
Jim Grant is a deck refinisher. Photos by Patrick McCombe.



Move along. Following the sprayer, the painting pad works the coating into the wood and moves excess material to spots with less. Penetrating oil finishes are generally pretty forgiving, but one way to mess up is to leave puddles of wet coating on the deck boards.



Hit the field. When the railings and cutting-in are complete, use an airless sprayer to coat the rest of the deck, moving along the length of the boards and applying the finish one board at a time. Plan your work so you can exit the deck without walking on the wet finish.



Beads please. A new finish helps the deck last longer by protecting it from rain, sun, and stains.