

Homeowner's Guide

How to Maintain
Your Deck

After having cleaned and sealed my first ten or so decks, I thought I knew all there was to know about deck maintenance.

Years later, after completing several hundred decks, I was getting kind of cocky: a know-it-all, if you know what I mean.

Now I have cleaned and sealed well over a thousand decks, and there is one thing I have learned:

Just when you think you have seen and done it all, someone (the homeowner) will have a deck where you just can't figure what product they've used to seal or stain their deck.

Either they've just moved into the house, and the deck maintenance was already completed, or they hired someone to do it, and the person providing the service never informed them about what product was used to clean and seal their deck.

Now, for the homeowner this is probably no big deal, but for the deck - cleaning guy (if he knows what he is doing), this information is important information.

In fact this will determine how he does the job.

The deck-cleaning guy needs to know the variables:

- How old is the deck?
- When was the last time the deck was wash or sealed?
- Was the deck hand-scrubbed with a deck cleaner?
- What product was used to seal or stain the deck?
- What direction does the deck face in relation to the sun?
- What is the deck made of, pressure treated or cedar wood?
- Was a solid stain used on the deck?
- Is there mold on the deck?

I will explain how I use this information and how you as a homeowner can get a better understanding of what a professional looks for. If you are going to do the job yourself, you will have the basic knowledge to do it after reading this information.

How old is the deck?

The age of the deck will determine whether you use a clear or solid product to seal your deck.

If the deck is new (under five years old) I generally want to use a clear or semi-transparent product.

A clear or semi-transparent product allows the natural beauty of the wood and the grain to stand out.

If the deck is more than five years old and starting to show signs of aging (like cracks and splinters), I use a solid stain to try to hide these imperfections.

Don't be in a hurry to try to colorize your deck (the term *colorize* means to use a solid-color stain on your deck).

Once you have applied a solid-color stain to the deck, you can't change it back if you don't like it, so give it serious thought before you do.

My suggestion is always to keep your deck looking as natural as you can for the first several years. You won't regret it.

A solid color stain is also more labor-intensive than a clear or semi-transparent product. So you'd better be prepared for some long working days if your deck is large, and you chose to stain it.

When was the last time your deck was washed or sealed?

This information determines how difficult the job will be.

If the deck is not on a regular maintenance schedule and has not been taken care of for a number of years you are going to have to use more effort and materials to get the deck looking good again.

It's like letting your car sit in the weather year round without waxing it.

After a while the paint color gets dull and waxing it won't help at all, it's time for a paint job.

Your outdoor deck needs to be maintained on a regular basis for year round enjoyment and to prolong its life.

The whole secret of doing a great job on your deck is in the cleaning process.

The better you clean your deck, the better a fresh coat of stain or sealer will take to the wood, and the better the finished results will look.

So, take the extra time to do a good job when cleaning your deck!

Was the deck hand scrub with a deck cleaner?

Hand-scrubbing the deck is the only way to clean all the way to the bottom of the pores of the wood.

It takes effort and elbow grease. To do the job right, you have to use a deck cleaner and follow up with power-washing.

To get the best results possible you must hand-scrub the deck so you can get full penetration of the product into the pores of the wood.

What product was used to seal or stain the deck?

You will want to know what product was used to seal or stain the deck if possible. This will determine a number of things.

If a solid color stain was used, and it was a dark color, if you try to use a light-colored stain to go over it, you will generally get a bleed-through. The dark will show ever so slightly through the lighter colored stain.

This doesn't happen with all products, but it's why we ask what product was used on the deck.

We're just doing our homework and preparing ourselves for what to expect.

It's best to stick with the same brand of product that was use on the deck before. Some products adhere better when using the same brand, and there is less chance of flaking or peeling from one year to the next.

As a deck-cleaning contractor, I believe the most important thing to have is product knowledge. Knowing this product will work with this wood under these circumstances when this other product has already been applied is vital.

Even if I don't get a job, I always want to know what product was used especially if the deck looks good, so I can do a better work for future customers.

So,if you're at your friend's or neighbor's house and you like how their deck looks ask what product they use on their deck. Half the battle is educating yourself about the different products.

Don't always rely on the sales guy at the paint store; sometimes all they want to do is sell you something-something you don't want or need.

What direction does the deck face in relation to the sun?

If the orientation of the deck is south of southwest, you are going to have a great deal of sun exposure year round.

I think the number one problem for decks is ultra violet rays (also known as UV rays). Sun exposure causes deck-sealing products to degrade at a higher rate.

A solid-color product will hold up better to sun exposure (last 2 to 3 times longer) than a semi-transparent product.

The down side of using a solid-color product on the south or southwest side is you are creating a solar collector. A dark color on the south side will turn your deck into an Easy Bake Oven®.

I have seen deck temperatures reach 130+ degrees during the summer, making the deck unusable during the day. Lesson one, don't use a dark-colored stain on a deck on the south side of your house.

Also, you have to be careful when cleaning, sealing, or staining your deck in direct sunlight during the warmer months.

There is a lot that can go wrong during these hot days.

The deck cleaner can dry out too quickly (Solution: pre-soak the deck before you start to make sure the deck cleaner doesn't evaporate.) It's even possible for the deck cleaner to burn into your the deck. The solution is to work in the morning or late evening.

Drying out or burning can also happen with deck stains if you are not experience. If the deck is too hot and you don't know what your doing the stain will burn into the deck causing the color to be uneven.

What is the deck made of, pressure treated or cedar wood?

If the deck is made of pressure-treated wood (which is the most common construction material), you shouldn't have too many problems.

Pressure-treated wood is harder than cedar.

Pressure-treated wood is more forgiving than cedar when power washing (when power washed by a professional) if you get too close to the wood.

Pressure treated wood will accept more variations of products. Clear, semi-transparent, semi-solid or solid.

I have to point out that if you have just had a new pressure treated wood deck, built you should wait several months before you put a sealer on. The wood is wettest when it is shipped from the supplier and needs time to dry out. If the deck was built on the south or southwest side of the house it will probably dry out faster, at least one month.

No matter what wood you choose, it is important to start taking care of your deck as soon as you can. Think of it as an insurance policy on your investment.

Cedar Wood

Cedar is a soft wood and tends to need more maintenance.

Additional care is needed when you clean cedar as there is a chance you might damage the wood with the power washer.

Damage can be prevented by hand-scrubbing the deck occasionally, using more elbow grease and less power washing. Using a smaller tip on the power washing wand also helps (a 25 degree tip should be fine).

Do your best to keep debris from getting between the deck floor boards. Leaves that are left between the boards will accumulate and retain moisture and will cause the cedar to rot prematurely.

Also it's very important to use a product that's made for cedar. If you like the natural cedar look, you will want a semi-transparent product that has a light pigmentation.

The downside of using a semi-transparent stain is that it breaks down quicker with sun exposure. If you want the natural look of cedar you will have to take care of your deck more often.

If you are considering a new cedar deck, make sure the builder uses stainless steel nails. This will prevent rust spots and tannin stains appear in the wood.

3 things to think about before staining cedar with a solid color stain: Why didn't I just use pressure-treated wood and stain that and save a ton of money in the process. After the wood is covered with a solid stain, no one will know the difference.

No, you can't sand cedar and have the appearance stay the same. If you sand cedar, it will stick out like a sore thumb. So make sure sanding is what you want to do before you do it.

No, you cannot use bleach on your cedar deck to clean it. I have seen this more than once. You are stripping the natural color from the wood.

Was a solid stain used on the deck?

Several things you should consider if your deck already has a solid: Be sure the new stain will not bleed through the old stain, especially when you are using a lighter color stain on top of a darker color stain.

Try to do a test in a place where it won't be noticed before you use the new stain so that you are happy with the results.

Most of the color pigment lies in the bottom of the stain container, so you should constantly stir the stain to get a consistent look when it's applied to the deck.

If you are using several one-gallon containers of stain, try combining them into one larger container so the color will stay consistent.

Try not to use a dark color stain if the deck is located on the south or southwest side of your home. This will turn your deck into a solar collector.

Some solid stains do not dry well when the temperature is lower than forty degrees, so try to work when the weather permits.

Try not to work in direct sunlight on very hot days. High temperatures will cause the stain to burn into the grain of the wood. Change your work schedule to morning or evening, when it's cooler.

Tip. Try staining your deck railings white instead of the same color as the rest of the deck. It will look better. When you are driving around or going through your magazines, notice the white railings. See how they stand out. ? (You can thank me later.)

Is there mold on the deck?

Last, we have to talk about mold on your deck. This problem usually occurs on the north or east side of the house, where the deck doesn't have exposure to the sun.

If your deck does have mold, you should take care of it as soon as possible. You can go to your local hardware or paint store and pick up deck cleaner. Read the directions and follow them. The one thing you should be careful of is wash all the deck cleaner off of the deck, when you're done.

If your deck is made of cedar, you need to pay more attention to the problem. Mold will eat into the soft cedar wood at a quicker rate. If you have a cedar deck, act on the problem immediately.

Also, I recommend a spring and fall deck check-up, this is the perfect time to do minor maintenance. Just hose off the deck, remove any debris between the deck boards, and refasten any loose boards.

There you go, a simple plan to take care of your deck. With a little effort, you will enjoy your deck for years to come.

Just put it on your to-do list. Better yet you can **contact us** here!

3 Things Not To Do With Your Deck

1. **Bird Feeders:** Birds have a nasty habit of doing things you really don't want to see or be near and that is as nice as I can say it (bird droppings.)The best thing you can do with a bird feeder is to keep it as far away from the deck as possible.

2. **Grills:** 87% of deck owners own at least one grill.

The number-one problem is placing the grill too close to the siding of the house. This is a major problem if the siding is made of vinyl. So keep this in mind when you have your next cookout.

3. **Plant Containers:** Plant containers are nice but you want to make sure they sit on small blocks of wood (or whatever material you choose),so there is ventilation underneath.

If moisture gets trapped, you are going to have a stain on your deck and even rotting in some instances.

If it's a large plant container, consider putting it on wheels. That is what I do with my large plants.

Exotic Woods Teak , Mahogany, and Ipe

I have worked on several “exotic” wood species and the thing I have learned is, take your time.

Wood such as teak, mahogany, or Ipe is very dense (hard). This causes the grain of the wood to be very tight.

This makes it more difficult to get products to penetrate the pores of the wood, causing you to, have to care of the exotic wood more often. At least once a year, a cleaning and sealing is required.

I don't use cleaning chemicals because light streaking will occur if you are not careful. This streaking usually disappears when sealer is applied. My best advice is to use plain water to clean such a deck.

WARNING: What I'm about to tell you should be done only **at your own risk**. I have used a product called Simple Green ® for cleaning teak furniture with good results. I have also powerwashed exotic woods with good results, but I am experience.

If you are going to do it, **TEST** in a small area. If the results are O.K., go ahead and proceed.

I have used (and I normally don't recommend products) Cabot's Australian Oil Natural ® with good results.

I use a sponge brush which soaks up the product, then go with the grain of the wood when applying the product. Make sure you have plenty of rags handy because with a tight-grained wood, you are going to do a lot of wiping.

