

QUESTION & ANSWER

Finding Better Treated Decking

Q The prospective clients I've dealt with lately are very budget conscious. Consequently, I've sold more decks floored with treated lumber than in years past. But I'm worried about how that might affect my reputation in the long term. After all, synthetic decking came into being in part because of the maintenance issues associated with treated lumber. Are there ways to buy better grades of treated lumber?

A Huck DeVenio, manager of marketing communications at Arch Wood Protection, responds: What you're seeing may not be unique to your area. In the past year, according to numbers presented at Principia Partners' Wood, Plastic, and Composite Decking conference, the percentage of decks using composites or tropical hardwoods decreased relative to the percentage of those built with pressure-treated decking.

While it is impossible to avoid all warping and cracking, these tendencies are less prevalent in higher quality products. Of course, premium treated-wood decking is more expensive than commodity decking, but it can cost less than synthetic or hardwood options.

One deck builder in Georgia, John Paulin of Tailor Decks, worked with two treating companies and a local dealer, along with their sawmill suppliers, to generate his own line of deck material – Tailored Wood – made with premium treated wood (**Figure 1**). (Paulin is willing to discuss his experience. Email him at john@tailordecks.com.) Paulin is a fan of wood decks, and his view seems to resonate with others – one of his treated-wood creations won the North American Deck and Railing Association's 2011 Deck Competition.

You don't need to create your own line of decking, however, to get higher-grade treated material. It's available, although you may have to ask for a special order or visit a different dealer than usual. Wood-preservation companies produce what their dealers request, and dealers stock what they think customers will buy. The grade of the lumber is ink-stamped on each piece at the sawmill; if you have been disappointed with the appearance of Standard grade decking or #2 grade lumber, consider stepping up to Premium decking and #1 or C & Btr 2x6.

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Figure 1. The winner of NADRA's 2011 Deck Competition, Tailor Decks, specifies all-sapwood 2-inch KDAT lumber that's milled with a crowned top, beveled sides, and kerfs on the bottom.

Another option is wood that is kiln dried after treatment (KDAT). This process dries the wood under controlled conditions at the treating plant, which minimizes internal tensions within the wood, reducing the tendency of lumber of any grade to crack. Contrast this with green decking that dries unevenly after installation, with the sun beating on the upper side while the underside faces damp, shaded earth. Additionally, some sources offer deck boards with relief kerfs cut into the bottom surface to reduce drying stresses that cause cracking.

Properly treated wood will resist termite damage and fungal decay for decades, but it's not protected against the stresses of swelling and shrinking caused by moisture. That's why periodic coating with water repellent is recommended for aesthetically sensitive areas.

To provide a jump-start on maintenance, use preserved wood that has been treated with water repellent in addition to the preservatives. This increases dimensional stability and reduces stresses that cause cracking and warping. Surface coating is still recommended, but the initial application is less critical and performance is improved.

Outside the Box

With some work, you can obtain treated decking that has tight growth rings or that contains no heartwood or flat grain. All of these characteristics make for more stable decking. Such specifications are not common, and finding them requires a good relationship with suppliers. Perhaps you can convince your local dealer that stocking such products would be a way to distinguish its business from the competition.

As Paulin discovered when dealing with his suppliers,

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COX INDUSTRIES



Figure 2. Laminated deck columns are less likely to twist or bow than solid timbers, and the hollow type allows for hidden wiring of lamps.

decking can be milled in ways that make it hold up better in service. To shed water and remove surface blemishes, deck lumber can be produced with a crowned top. Another innovation is beveled sides; deck boards whose sides taper inward slightly are less prone to trapping rain and debris between adjacent pieces.

The platform isn't the only deck component where enhancements are possible — deck columns and railing posts are others. Twisted 4x4s can cause construction difficulties and detract from the appearance of a deck; those problems can be largely precluded by the use of laminated deck columns. Combining smaller pieces of wood into a post helps to cancel out the warping that can occur with a single, solid timber. Another benefit to laminated 4x4s is that they're often manufactured with hollow centers, which can house wires for lighting (**Figure 2**).

While some lumber dealers stock preserved wood with special features, such as being KDAT or having built-in water repellent, other dealers may not. Even so, they can easily obtain them for you. In more unusual cases, you may have to cultivate a relationship with your sources, explain what you plan to do, show them your expected volume, and find a dealer who is willing to cooperate. Lining up supply could take some effort; however, it might enable you to offer a distinctive product that homeowners desire, at a price lower than that of alternative decking materials.

What About Maintenance?

All deck surfaces require some maintenance, as sunlight, weather, foot traffic, and wayward barbecue sauce will affect a deck's appearance. Maintenance for a wood deck is typically cosmetic rather than structural and is not particularly onerous. An occasional cleaning and a periodic application of a water repellent or a stain containing water repellent are generally adequate to keep wood looking good for decades.

You may want to consider incorporating such required maintenance into your business. In addition to providing the initial finish on the decks he builds, Paulin offers an annual maintenance contract to his customers, which extends the warranty on his decks. ❖