Designing to Sell Decks by Bobby Parks

DeckTools 1.2
DeckTools Software
877/276-0762
decktools.com
Street price: $1,895 (minus 10 percent for NADRA members)

For the 20 years before I bought DeckTools software, my design and sales approach was to gather site information and return to the office to design the deck and price it out. If the job sold, I'd engineer the deck and create detailed drawings for the building department and working drawings for the crews. Finally, I'd do material takeoffs.

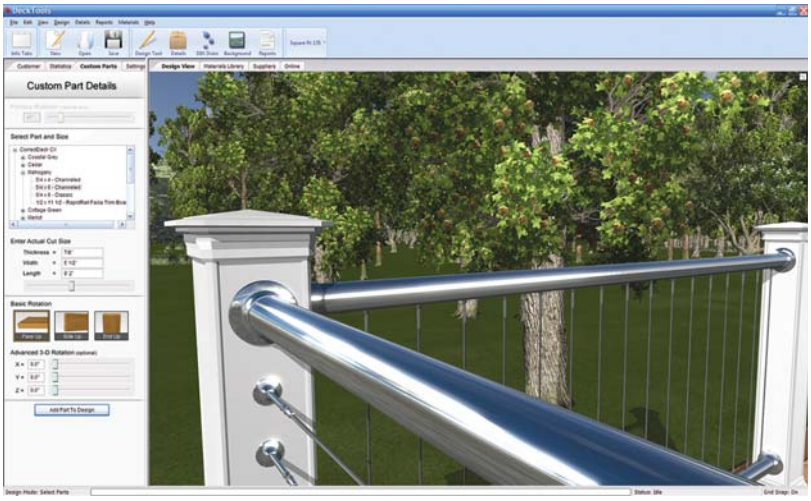
The downsides of this process are obvious: It takes too long and results in only limited design options for the customer, who, despite the work I'd put into the drawings, would often have difficulty visualizing the deck from them.

Now — using DeckTools — I can design, price, and create working drawings and material takeoffs in less time than it takes to do a single drawing by hand. Plus, the program's graphics make it easier for the customer to understand what the finished deck is going to look like.

DeckTools was designed for deck builders and carpenters, not for the Einsteins of the world. It calculates the square footage of the deck and the length of the rail as you go. It's simple to add stairs and rails or adjust the decking orientation — click in the Design Tool box and on the location on the design. Set deck and landing elevations by clicking the Details box and entering the height.

The program can also be set up to design decks the way you build them. For example, you can set the defaults to space columns along a beam depending on the size of the deck, determine joist size based on span and joist spacing, and find footing sizes based on the deck.

When a design is completed, it can be viewed in several ways. I can remove



Product renderings standard with DeckTools		
Decking	***Railing***	***Accessories***
Cedar	Atlantis Rail	DekDrain
CorrectDeck	Deckorators	Headcote screws
EverGrain	Fortress Iron Railing	Stained-glass post caps
Ipe	Rail Simple	Tiger Claw hidden fasteners
Latitudes	Glossy white vinyl	
Pressure treated	White painted wood	
Redwood		
Trex		

the decking layer with a mouse click and view just the structure, which I can tweak as needed. Clicking over the design displays the dimensions. I don't have to draw different elevations — the program creates them from the initial drawing. The views can then be printed out: structural drawings for the permit application, working drawings for the crew, and detailed finish views for a homeowners' association.

Pricing is quick and easy, though you have to regularly update your material-cost data. DeckTools can be set up to display your costs or your customer prices, using stick-by-stick or square-foot pricing.

All these features are great, but as far as I'm concerned, the key benefit of DeckTools is its value as a selling tool. I can show the customer plan and elevation views — and a realistic 3D image, which can be rotated, letting the customer see the deck design from every angle.

Additionally, the DeckTools "3D Materials Library" makes it possible to show decks rendered with a variety of products (see list, page 82), giving the customer a sense of how various options would affect the look. I can even show several colors of selected decking and place deck furniture on the design to better demonstrate the scale and potential use for the customer.

Some deck builders I know have DeckTools on their laptops and go from design to price to contract on the sales call. Since my overall computer skills are pretty basic, I still do a lot of work in the office. But even with my limited skills, I've found DeckTools easy to use: It took me maybe an hour to begin cranking out multiple designs.

Bobby Parks owns Peachtree Decks and Porches, in Atlanta.

Cheap, Grippy, and Tough

HyFlex 11-600 Work Gloves
Ansell Healthcare
800/800-0444
ansellpro.com
Street price: $3

by Mark Clement

My hands have been callused so long I can't recall my last blister, but I wear work gloves anyway to prevent cuts and pain and to securely grip tools and materials. I've tried those fancy work gloves that cost upward of 30 bucks a pop — I like them, but my wallet doesn't.

Ansell's HyFlex Lite 11-600 form-fitting gloves, on the other hand, are acceptable to both me and my wallet. They repel muck during site work and protect during demo and building, yet are so thin I can pencil a layout or dial my phone with them on. They don't overheat my hands or snag on anything. I can handle bulk nails and reload my framing gun. Gripping a saw or impact driver is a cinch. And they cost three bucks a pair.

The 11-600's body is made from stretch nylon polymer, with a polyurethane coating on the palm, according to Ansell. They fit snugly on various-sized hands: My hands are small, but bigger hands can wear the same gloves with no trouble.

After fit, a glove's ultimate value to me is what I call grip-and-slip. Along with a solid grip, I want some things to slide through loose fingers (think tossing dirt with a shovel or coiling cords or hoses). The Ansells deliver a nice mix — though they are at the slippery end of the curve, which I noticed handling Azek PVC decking. I had to squeeze the material a bit, but not so much as to, well, infuriate me. And the gloves' grip improved as the polyurethane wore.

The Ansell glove body fabric didn't loosen up like the no-name cotton gloves with coated palms that I've used (though those are grippier with good slip). Another plus: When painting, the 11-600s kept paint off my hands better than cotton gloves.

Bottom line, the Ansell 11-600s nicely combine low cost and high performance. I can grab a pair (or 10) anytime I want and if I lose or tear them, so what? They cost three bucks.

***Mark Clement** is a deck builder in Ambler, Pa., and a member of the DeckExpo live-action-clinic team.*

Scaffold Strengtheners

T-Brace Brackets
T-Brace
866/454-4983
t-brace.com
Street price: three for $99

The older I get, the more I appreciate the speed and ease that scaffolding brings to a job. Sure, it takes time to set up, but that's an investment that usually pays handsome dividends. Not necessarily in safety, however: A lot of scaffolding that I see set up is nothing like safe. And though it was stupid, in years past I too spent a fair amount of time on scaffolds made from overspanned, unrated 2-by lumber, occasionally wondering just how far a 2x10 would sag before it broke.

Yet scaffolding can certainly increase the safety of your work, as well as its speed and ease. It's not all about plank strength (proper guard rails and adequate support are crucial too), but that's a good starting place: If the planks themselves won't hold the weight, everything else fades in importance.

I think the best planks are the long, lightweight aluminum ones. But while they're great for siders and framers, most deck builders don't use scaffold often enough to justify the expense or the storage space. Dedicated LVL planks are another option, but they're shorter and still need storing, in this case somewhere they won't rot.

I recently found a third option that makes a lot of sense for the occasional scaffold user. T-Braces sling a 2x6 strongback under a 2x10 walk plank. You want to use good-quality lumber, but the manufacturer claims that three T-Braces will enable a properly set-up 16-foot plank to safely support 500 lb. Use treated lumber and you can frame your next deck with it. And three T-Braces would fit behind the seat of most pickups. Try that with a honking-big aluminum plank. — *Andy Engel* ❖