

Doctoring Your Deck.
You don't have to have a medical license to give your deck a facelift. Just do your homework first.

"They give us, our family and friends much pleasure. We have had a wedding, a reception, a graduation party, baby showers, wedding showers, our homeowners' picnics, and so many family gatherings we have lost count." Those words were written about one family's decks. (Yes, this family actually had several decks around their house.) A beautiful wood deck can contribute directly to your home's value and to your family's quality of life, and whether the deck is 200 square feet or 2,000 square feet, many people are passionately proud of their decks.

So why do so many homeowners let their decks become downright shabby looking, if not damaged? Besides time pressures, many people are completely confused about how to maintain a deck to keep it looking its best, so they avoid the project. And even if you're an old-hand at deck care, the past few years have seen changes in deck care products, making it even more tricky to stay current.

The good news is that keeping your deck in good condition can amount to no more than an afternoon or two every couple of years, depending on factors like the climate where you live and the type of products you use. (Of course, this excludes regular sweeping up and hosing off the deck to remove dirt and leaves.) In fact, even a complete deck makeover can be relatively quick. Due to newer product formulas, it is possible to clean, color and waterproof a 1,200 square foot deck all in one day.

The "down" side to deck care isn't really a downer. It's just that there is no "one size fits all" answer. The best way to clean and protect your deck depends on several variables. What kind of wood is the deck made of? What kind of deck coating have you used before? Do you want a very natural wood look or would you like to add more color? Carefully assessing your deck's condition and knowing what you've got to fix—

as well as knowing how you want your deck to look when you're done – goes a long, long way toward a smooth and satisfactory job.

So where to start? Deck care has two parts that go hand in hand – cleaning and waterproofing. (You may hear the word “sealing” as a synonym for waterproofing. Just keep in mind that either word covers a wide variety of product types and deck looks, from clear finishes to colorful stains.) Sometimes you may need to replace a board or hammer nails back in – but taking care of the cleaning and waterproofing in a timely manner actually helps reduce the need for this kind of structural repair.

Rage Against “Deck-struction”

Water took down the Titanic, and it can take down your deck, too. Definitely not as quickly, but outdoors, water is wood's worst enemy.

According to the chemists for the Thompson's Water Seal brand, wood that has not been waterproofed will absorb rain or even water from a sprinkler, causing it to swell. As the water evaporates, the wood cells shrink. This “dimensional instability”, repeated over time, is what causes boards to crack or split, and nails to loosen.

The speed with which this happens varies greatly depending on rainfall and temperatures, but some homeowners have noted cracks after only months. And just because you aren't using your deck during the winter doesn't mean it's in hibernation. Ice and snow can wreak havoc on your deck when they melt as surely as an April shower. (Also, keep in mind that sunlight and mildew may cause cosmetic or surface changes, but they don't affect the structural integrity of the wood. Water does.

A common myth is that pressure-treated lumber, the most common deck wood, is waterproof. FALSE! Most pressure-treated lumber resists termites and wood rot, but not water damage.

What about cedar and redwood – or even teak and mahogany? (Although still a very small overall percentage of decks, more decks are being made from “exotic” woods.) The bottom line any wood you might use for deck building is vulnerable to water damage and needs to be protected.

One of the most common questions is “How often should I waterproof my deck?” Again, there is no one-size-fits-all answer. It depends on a number of factors, from the type of coating that was on the wood originally, to the environment in your part of the country, to the amount of foot traffic on the deck. You could need to re-apply waterproofer after just one year, but in many cases, several years can go by between sessions of deck cleaning and waterproofing. More good news -- it is easy to determine when it's time to waterproof your deck.

The maker of Thompson's® Water Seal® products has long recommended the “splash” test. Just splash water on your deck – from a hose, a glass, whatever. If it is quickly and noticeably absorbed, and the surface darkens, then the wood isn't waterproof. If the water beads, sits on the surface or runs off, then you're covered. Over time, **the water beading may diminish, while the waterproofer is still working**. So if you don't see beading, definitely watch for water absorption.

Off To A Clean Start

Cleaning your deck is a critical part of the process for several reasons. Aesthetically, it can make a dramatic difference in your finished results by removing years of dirt, surface wood cells that have grayed over time due to sunlight, mildew and dark mold, and worn coatings. While algae is green, other biological organisms like mold and mildew are dark in color, and many decks are discolored because of mold as much as because of color fading. But it's also essential to “come clean” before you apply a new coat of waterproofer because soils and previous coatings can keep the new

waterproofer from being absorbed properly, decreasing its effectiveness, potentially leaving the surface sticky and preventing a nice, even finish.

Even a brand-new deck should be cleaned before treating to remove dirt and possible mill glaze, which may not be visible to the eye. Another common myth is that new wood should be allowed to “season” for six months to a year before being waterproofed. This is a recipe for damage, and new lumber should be treated within the first month, unless you’re using one of the premium types of waterproofed lumber mentioned earlier.

Cleaning your deck is a lot easier if you choose the right method from the start. As the variety of exterior waterproofer has increased – and formulas have changed – manufacturers have introduced new types of cleaners to handle different needs. The “product” decision should be based on what you need to remove:

- A general “cleaner”, such as Thompson’s® Water Seal Deck® Wash, will remove dirt, mold, mildew or a clear, oil-based waterproofer that has “weathered” (i.e., it was applied at least two years ago). You can also get multi-surface cleaners, like Thompson’s® Water Seal® Oxy Foaming Action Exterior Mutli-Surface Cleaner, which will remove dirt, mildew, algae and fungus from surfaces like wood, composite, concrete and vinyl. The oxygen-based formulas are biodegradable.
- A more powerful solution is needed to remove a weathered tinted waterproofer or a semi-transparent stain, along with the dirt and mildew. The Thompson’s Company labels its product “Heavy Duty Deck Cleaner”. This type of product also works well to remove weathered water-based coatings like Thompson’s® Water Seal® Advanced waterproofer.
- Redwood and cedar have natural characteristics that require special treatment to enhance beauty and waterproofing efficiency. These types of wood can darken if cleaned with many types of cleaners, so look for a product formulated specifically for redwood and cedar. The Thompson’s Company labels its product “Deck Cleaner & Brightener” because it cleans while optimizing the wood’s natural color. If you have a weathered tinted waterproofer or stain on your redwood or cedar deck, use a product designed to remove these coatings and follow-up with the Deck Cleaner & Brightener to neutralize the cleaner and bring back the wood’s color before waterproofing.
- Solid stains will need to be removed by a product labeled stain remover or “Deck Stripper”

After the selection, the actual application of the deck cleaner is relatively straightforward. Many wood cleaners are pre-mixed and ready-to-use; others come in a concentrated form and need to be mixed with water. Either way, most deck cleaners can be sprayed on with a pump-up garden sprayer. (Just be sure to check the instructions – a Deck Stripper should not be sprayed. It should be applied in a plastic watering can.) After waiting a short time (usually around 5-15 minutes), you'll either spray off the deck with a garden hose, or scrub lightly with a synthetic broom (necessary to remove tinted waterproofers or stains), then rinse off. Read and follow label directions – in some cases, you'll be advised to work in small sections at a time to avoid the product drying on the wood. If you missed any spots, or if there are any stubborn areas, you can go back and “spot treat” that section.

To safeguard plants and landscaping around the deck, thoroughly saturate them with water before applying the cleaner. Cover them with heavy plastic while you're working, then after removing the plastic, spray the area again with clean water. This will effectively dilute any residual cleaner. (Follow this same procedure when spraying on a waterproofer, to avoid overspray affecting your plants.)

When it comes to selecting a deck cleaner and a waterproofer, as well as to using them, there is one critical point that can't be stressed enough. It has the potential to save countless hours of frustration and work. **READ** the label, and follow the directions listed. To save time in the store, many manufacturers have detailed product information on their Web sites, making it easier to decide on what you need before you go in. If you're at all unsure whether a product will handle your needs, call the company's customer service number to be sure. A little advance planning pays off tremendously in the end.

Another option for cleaning a deck is pressure-washing -- using a gas or electric-powered machine to deliver water in highly concentrated jets that power-off dirt. Since

pressure-washers can be used on a variety of structures, from cars and boats to decks and siding, cleaning solutions can be added to further boost cleaning on different materials. Pressure-washers will remove dirt, mildew, grayed cells and all types of waterproofer or stains, but they can damage wood if the water pressure or PSI (pounds per square inch) is too high and you hold the wand too close to the surface. It's possible to literally "carve" into the wood with the water. For most woods, 1500-2500 PSI should be sufficient, but for softer woods like cedar, keep the PSI at 1200-1500.

Don't Forget Your Coat(ing)

Act Two of your deck's revival involves decisions based on questions of both beauty and protection. At this point, consider how you would like the deck to look when you're finished – and how you'd like it to look a year or two from now. Based on these decisions, you can choose the best waterproofing coating for your deck. If you want your deck's color to weather naturally to a "driftwood" kind of silver-gray, you'll choose one type of product. If you want to keep the "like new" wood color for as long as possible, you'll select another type of waterproofer. If you want to add color, you have still more choices.

There are four different "categories" of deck coatings, each of which will give you different looks and types of protection for your deck. (In the following breakdown, we've included estimates for the length of time that generally elapses before reapplication is needed. Keep in mind that many different factors influence the life of a coating, from the product's formulation and proper application, to weather exposure and how you use the deck. These are guidelines only – use the splash test described earlier to decide if your deck is still waterproof.)

- **CLEAR, MULTI-SURFACE WATERPROOFERS** – these products can be used on wood, brick, concrete and other masonry surfaces. They are primarily designed to stop water damage – again, wood's greatest enemy, and also a cause of cracking on other natural, porous building materials – but they don't contain mildewcides, pigments or UV absorbers. Wood treated with this type of

waterproofers will weather over time to a silver-gray color. This type of product will need to be reapplied every one to two years.

- CLEAR, WOOD-ONLY WATERPROOFERS – these products are specially formulated to protect wood, and will usually include agents to resist mildew and color fading in addition to waterproofing. They may subtly enhance the existing color of the wood, but they won't change it, so if you love the natural color of your wood, these are good choices. No clear product will completely block the sun's rays, but the color fading will take place gradually. These types of waterproofers typically need to be reapplied every one to two years.
- TINTED, WOOD-ONLY WATERPROOFERS or "TONERS" – these products usually offer the same combination of waterproofing, fade and mildew-resistance, but they let you add a very sheer, natural-wood color at the same time. For instance, The Thompson's Company offers a Tinted Wood Protector in five shades – Honey Gold, Natural Cedar, Rustic Red, Nutmeg Brown, and Coastal Gray. The color allows most of the wood's grain and character to show through. Re-application is usually needed within two to three years.
- WOOD STAINS – Exterior wood stains are more pigmented than the "toners" and come in a wider range of colors – well over 100 shades are available ranging from natural wood colors to pastel whites, greens, blues, yellows, and more. These stains are available in *semi-transparent formulas*, which allow some of the wood grain to show through, and *solid formulas*, which completely cover the wood grain, but allow some of the wood texture to come through. Semi-transparent stains will typically need re-application after three years – solid formulas can remain in good shape up to five years.

Many people think that "stains" and "waterproofers" are mutually exclusive, and they wonder if they should apply a clear waterproofer over an exterior stain. The good news is that many quality exterior stains will have effective waterproofing properties, and no additional product is needed. Read the package copy to see if the stain you're considering also offers mildew and fade-resistance.

Paints usually aren't considered a deck coating. Technically, you could paint a deck as long as you make sure that the label says the product will withstand foot traffic.

Not all paints will withstand that kind of stress. However, paint negates most of the natural look and feel of the wood, and once you've committed to paint on a deck, removing it can be a big chore.

No matter what look you want, check the label of any waterproofing product that you buy to be sure it says it passes "ASTM" standards for waterproofing. Not all

products labeled as waterproofers provide the same level of protection. In fact, some products on the shelf actually fail industry measurements for effective waterproofing.

Oil And Water – and a Deck Care Advancement

The different kinds of deck coatings – from clear to solid stain -- can all be found in either oil- or water-based formulas. At one point, many consumers were skeptical of the efficacy of water-based coatings, but manufacturers have made great strides in formulating these coatings to offer the same or better protection than their oil-based counterparts. Based on the additional benefits water-based formulas offer, it's understandable that the consumer demand for water-based formulas is growing steadily stronger. (New regulations involving air quality and emissions from paints and related coatings are also furthering the drive to more environmentally friendly water-based coatings.)

In fact, Thompson's® Water Seal® *Advanced* waterproofers provide water-repellency levels that exceed those of oil-based products of the same type. And while the product line delivers maximum-strength waterproofing protection, it eases up on the application workload, with low odor and soap and water cleanup.

Best of all, the formula is one of the few on the market that can be applied to damp wood. (Most waterproofers require a 48-72 hour wait between cleaning the wood and applying the waterproofer.) Thompson's® Water Seal® *Advanced* waterproofers can be applied two hours after cleaning is complete, meaning that the "one day deck makeover" is now a real possibility, not just a homeowner's daydream. Contractors have also indicated a high level of interest in the line. Since the Thompson's® Water Seal® *Advanced* products can be applied to damp wood, a contractor can finish up a job in a day and not have to return to the job site several days later to finish waterproofing.

Thompson's® Water Seal® *Advanced* waterproofers can also be applied immediately to new pressure-treated lumber. Other products may recommend a 30-day wait before treating a new deck to ensure the liquid solution used in the pressure-treating process has dried.

More Waterproofing Words Of Wisdom

Most deck coatings today only require one coat, but you can choose different ways to get that coat on your wood. Most clear and tinted waterproofers can be applied with a brush, roller or pump-up garden sprayer. Obviously, the sprayer greatly reduces your bending and stooping, and speeds up the application process. (Sprayers are available in a wide-range of styles, but you should be able to get one that's adequate for this job for less than \$20.) Stains should not be applied in a pump-up garden sprayer, as the higher pigment loads can cause clogging. For most formulas, you can also use a compression-driven sprayer, at a low setting. With any type of sprayer, back-brushing (with paint pad or brush) may be required to even out the finish.

A great tool for applying any kind of deck coating, from clear to solid stains, is a paint pad. A paint pad goes on the end of a long handle, much like a mop. It eliminates the bending needed for a brush or roller, while giving you a great deal of control and precision over the product application for the best finish and performance.

It may surprise you to learn that the color of the wood will affect the final color of your deck if you are using a tinted waterproofer or semi-transparent stain. Test these coatings on a small, inconspicuous area of the deck to be sure you like the color before treating the entire deck.

Deck-orative Options

If you want to spend a little more time applying your waterproofer, it's possible to create fun patterns and distinctive designs. It can be as simple as leaving the center of

the deck “clear” (protected by a clear waterproofer) and creating a border with one of the tinted shades, or as elaborate as creating a faux “rug” using three (or more) shades of waterproofer applied in alternating blocks. Just don’t attempt to coat the entire deck with one waterproofer, then apply a second color over it. Apply each different type/color of waterproofer to bare wood.

All Hands On Deck!

The point of a deck is to help you forget your cares. Relax, reconnect with friends, family and nature – we’ll leave it up to you on how best to take advantage of the joys of your beautiful (and protected) deck.