



ASK THE BUILDER

CLEANING & SEALING YOUR DECK

*by award winning builder &
nationally syndicated columnist* **TIM CARTER**

Cleaning and Sealing Your Deck

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Introduction

I started writing this book back in 1995, possibly in 1994. That's when I wrote my first deck cleaning column. Peter Dexheimer, a subscriber to my weekly AsktheBuilder.com newsletter, caused that thought to resurface when he asked me the following two questions:

“What makes you an expert in the area of deck cleaning and sealing? What are your sources for recommending what you do?”

Peter asked me that because I quizzed my list of 100,000 newsletter subscribers about every pain point they feel when confronted with cleaning and sealing their decks. I did this in the final stages of writing this book to ensure I didn't forget to cover some aspect of deck cleaning, repairing and sealing.

The questions they asked, and my answers, are a major part of this book. I'll bet you all the burning questions you have about deck care are inside this book along with my answers.

My answer to Peter was simple. I'm an expert in deck cleaning and sealing through research and practice. I've conducted interviews with countless wood scientists, deck cleaner chemists, deck sealer chemists, composite deck scientists and inventors, deck-cleaning tool manufacturers, homeowners, etc., asking probing questions about every aspect of deck cleaning and sealing.

I've lost track of the number of decks I've built, cleaned, repaired, sealed and sat on. I've been maintaining wood and composite decks for over thirty-seven years. I've done professional autopsies on decks ruined by “professional cleaners” and homeowners alike.

I've removed giant deck lumber splinters from my hands, arms and legs in the field with my razor knife, and ruined more pairs of jeans splattering deck stain on them than I care to remember.

I've answered thousands of emails over the years sent to me by frustrated homeowners like you lamenting to me about their peeling, gray, slippery, aging decks. The common thread in the emails is the same: “What am I doing wrong? Why does my deck look so bad so quickly?”

Peter, I reckon I'm an expert because I've probably delved deeper into this topic than 99.99 percent of the population. It's my hope that makes me an expert in your eyes, and those of everyone that reads this book.

Decks are enormously popular because, in my opinion, they're much like riding a motorcycle. If you've ridden on a motorcycle you know how it's totally different than being in a car that has a roof, doors and windows.

A deck is an outdoor room. You feel one with nature when you're on your deck. It's so much different than being inside looking out through a window with a ceiling just overhead.

Some homeowners, you may be one, feel decks need far too much care and attention. This explains the massive growth in the past few decades of composite decking materials that need minimal care.

The casual homeowner might think that cleaning and sealing a deck is a simplistic task. It is when you have a full understanding of the entire process, the type of deck you have, the dangers of the cleaners and cleaning tools, and finally the vast differences in the sealing products out there and how they react with different wood species.

I've devoted the first part of this book to exploring all of those things so you don't ruin your deck and waste your valuable time and money.

It's my intention that you get a boatload of solid information right now as you read this ebook. But it gets better. In Chapter 8, you'll get a link that will take you to a secret page at my AsktheBuilder.com website. There you'll be able to see real ongoing deck sealer test videos.

This deck sealer test of many top brands will begin on May 2012. There will be great results by the end of the 2012 summer season.

You may be saying, "Gee whiz Tim, I need the test results NOW!"

I get that. That's why in Chapter 4 I reveal to you the deck sealer I've used for years. The deck sealer that works great for me.

But one never knows when a new product hits the market that could do better. That's what this test is all about. I'm always curious about new products that might outperform others. I like to ***Do It Right, Not Over.*** I hope that's your motto too.

TC

About the Author

Tim Carter is the founder of www.AsktheBuilder.com. Prior to starting his online business, Carter was a hands-on remodeling contractor and custom home builder. He was fortunate to be picked one of the Top 50 Remodeling Contractors in the USA in 1993, and used that award to launch www.AsktheBuilder.com.

As stated just above, Carter has deep deck-building and maintenance experience. Perhaps his best attribute is his desire to **Do it Right, Not Over**. Carter hopes you develop the same attitude about your deck cleaning and sealing project.

If you'd like tips like you'll soon discover in this ebook, simply sign up now for Tim's **FREE** www.AsktheBuilder.com newsletter. The newsletter is delivered via email, and comes out once a week.

Here are what a few of Tim's subscribers have to say about it:

"I know I can trust your information - no hidden agenda." - Laura Berry

"Your newsletter is definitely informative, and so cheery -- the world needs more of that."
- Ruth Smith

"Thank you for all the great advice! You are one of my few trusted sources for Internet information. Keep up the good work!" - Maureen Harkins

You sign up here: www.AsktheBuilder.com/Newsletter



Chapter One - Deck Care Overview

Chapter Highlights:

- Decks Need Regular Care - Even Composite Decks
- Sun and Water are Enemies
- Warning Signs It's Time to Clean and Seal!
- Ideal Weather Conditions to Work

Which Decks Need Care?

Every deck needs care, sometimes multiple times per season. At the very least they need washing with liquid dish soap and water just like you might clean a car that sits outdoors and is subject to airborne dirt, aerosol sugars from trees, sap from evergreen trees, diesel fuel exhaust soot, dust, etc.



This is a deck clearly in need of care. The pigmented sealer has failed, and it's time for it to be removed. Photo Credit: Jack Miller Copyright 2012

Please take the marketing messaging you hear from some of the composite and synthetic decking manufacturers with a grain of salt. When they say maintenance-free, they probably define maintenance as periodic sealing. If you ask them directly, they'll tell you their composite or synthetic decking materials absolutely require periodic cleaning. Maintenance free to me means you do nothing.

Natural wood decks will require more frequent and painstaking care than a composite deck made from plastic and wood fibers, or a deck made from pure vinyl or other synthetic compound like fiberglass.

Some woods are much more durable than others when exposed to the weather. Mother Nature has created some wood species that contain chemicals that aggressively fight

wood rot. Redwood, cedar, locust (to a degree) and some sustainable hardwoods from the rainforest are among these. Wood decks need to be protected from two things:

- Water
- Ultraviolet (UV) light from the sun

Sun and Water Attack Natural Wood Decks

Water readily soaks into the soft spring wood (light-colored bands of wood grain) of wood decks. Gravity pulls this water deeply into horizontal decking boards. Vertical pieces of wood that you might see in a railing don't suffer as badly as most of the water runs down and falls onto the deck below.

The water that soaks into the wood causes the wood to swell. When the sun comes out and the wind picks up, this causes the water to leave the wood allowing it to shrink back to normal size.

Repeated swell/shrink cycles cause the wood to move back and forth. This movement creates tiny checking cracks that allow water to penetrate even deeper into the wood. This causes greater swelling and more movement which leads to larger cracks in the wood.

See why it's important to stop water penetration into wood decking? I thought it would make sense.

The UV rays of the sun damage the lignin that holds the wood fibers together. Left unprotected from the sun's rays, wood will eventually be eroded with the combined forces of the sun, rain and wind.

The UV rays also break down the color molecules in the wood turning it gray.

When Does a Deck Need to be Cleaned and Sealed?

This is a frequently asked question by many homeowners. The bottom line is it's a very subjective decision.

Some people want their deck to look like a piece of highly polished furniture. Others don't mind if there's an emerald-green layer of algae on the deck giving it a rustic or natural look.



Here's a photo of algae growing on a railing and Trex® composite decking. Photo Credit: Tim Carter Copyright 2012

Other homeowners will try to gauge the need based on how the old sealer is performing. One test is the water bead test. Some feel if water is still beading up on the finish, then all is good.

The trouble is, some sealer manufacturers maintain that water beads magnify the sunlight and cause accelerated UV damage to the finish.

Furthermore, they say that contaminants in the rainwater are concentrated in the water beads and as the water evaporates, they become even more concentrated creating spot damage to the finish.

I can see that this may be possible, so beading water may not be such a good thing after all. But then again, it could be marketing hype.

The sealing part is not so simple. Some sealer manufacturers recommend a light maintenance coat of sealer at least once a year to keep the deck looking perfect. This would absolutely be necessary if you purchase a low-quality sealer as some can fail in as little as three months.

We know the two biggest enemies to natural wood decks are water and sunlight. Most of the resins in the sealers cause water to bead up on the horizontal decking and railings. If you see the water laying in sheets on the decking when a year before it used

to bead up, that's a sign the resins are probably breaking down and starting to let water into the wood.

For the most part, it's a personal issue with deck sealing frequency. I say this because you're going to be the judge of how bad the deck looks before you decide to take action.

Best Weather Conditions to Clean and Seal a Deck

The sealer manufacturer usually determines when it's best to do the job. You'll often see temperature and weather condition recommendations on the label. For example, the label may say to apply the sealer when the temperature is between 45 - 90 F with no chance of the temperature dropping below 32 F within so many hours.

But realize that the air temperature and the surface temperature of the wood are two different things. A hot wood surface may cause the cleaner or sealer to dry far too quickly and cause you enormous problems.

When cleaning a hot deck surface, the solution you use will evaporate before it can do deep cleaning on its own. While sealing, hot temperatures can make it hard for you to get the color to be uniform if you are using a pigmented sealer.

If the sealer you use is water-based, you have to be very aware of the threat of rain. If it rains on the deck before the sealer has dried or set up, you may be starting over because your sealer ends up in your yard.

For this reason, I tend to feel that the ideal air temperature to clean and seal a deck is probably 65-70 F with overcast or mostly cloudy skies. The less wind the better. Frequently the best time to clean and seal a deck, assuming dew is not an issue, is in the early morning just after sunrise.

Not only will it be peaceful outdoors at this hour, but the wind is usually calm, the air temperature is comfortable and the harsh sun will not bake you, the cleaner, or the sealer.