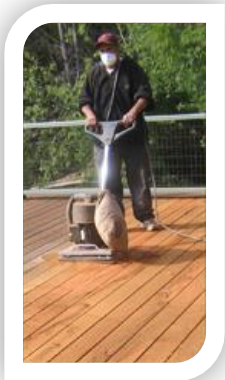


Restore life to old deck

Refinishing can make it new again



THE PLANKS OF wood had turned a shade of beaten-down gray. Dark circular stains stamped where the potted flowers stood. Even a light rain shower left the backyard deck soaked for hours.

We needed no further evidence. Our deck was begging for a face lift.

In the past, my husband has tackled restoring our massive back deck, complete with attached bench, lattice, beams and an overhang.

His know-how and skill were never in question. But that didn't make the work any less time consuming or back-breaking. So, this time, he agreed to turn the job over to a professional.

Four bids and several reference checks later, we signed a contract with All Pro Painting and Deck Restoration of Walnut Creek and Oakland. The cost difference among bid estimates was marginal. For our approximately 600-square-foot deck, plus all the extras, the initial contract was for \$2,320. What sold us on All Pro Painting was a matter of personal preference. We liked the Cabot woodcare products it uses.

And as we quickly discovered, deck refinishing is about a lot of choices.

All deck restorations start with a good scrubbing. Simply sweeping and hosing down the deck are not enough.

David Thompson of California Paints has written extensively about problems with the finish coating used on wood decks.

"Ultraviolet rays of the sun break down lignin (wood's natural glue) producing loose surface wood fibers in as little as one to two months," he explains. "These fibers represent surface contamination that is as detrimental to adhesion as dirt, chalk, mold, mildew or other loose material."

Those fibers can be cleaned by scrubbing with a stiff-bristled brush, pressure washing or by hand or mechanical abrasion, Thompson says.

Decks by Woodmasters, which serves central Contra Costa and Marin counties, uses high-pressure water to clean the deck. Woodmasters then sands the deck to remove old stain and sprays a fungicide to protect against mold and mildew.

Corey Persky, co-owner of Woodmasters, says they choose power washing because it allows them to reach the underside of the deck's boards.

"Power washing gets deep into the wood," he adds. "Surface cleaning is like a woman using a Buff Puff to take off makeup. This is a deep clean that gets under the stains and oils that have penetrated the wood."

All Pro Painting doesn't power wash. Instead, owner Al Ismaili completely sands the deck to its bare wood, then uses a specially formulated deck cleaner. A cleaner can remove mildew, mold, algae, deep-imbedded dirt, nailhead rust stains and the discoloration caused by tannin, the dark stains which are common on redwood and cedar decks.

Ismaili says he prefers an approach that combines sanding and a formulated cleaner.

"With pressure washing, the problem is that you're not getting the stain completely off," he says. "If you look at the grain in redwood, it has some hard and soft spots and you can gouge the wood if you pressure wash. Sanding takes more time, but your deck will have a longer life and better look."

Potentially gouging wood is why Persky advises homeowners not to attempt power washing as a do-it-yourself project.

"I know from experience, you can do serious damage -- splintering, gouging, basically ruining the wood," Persky says. "I know because I did it years and years ago."

The deck's old coating, whether varnished, stained or painted, needs to be removed before applying a new coating.

Lowe's "Deck Treatments Buying Guides" notes that stripping is especially important if you are changing the color because the new top coating may appear different in areas where residual coating remains underneath. Color bleeding is also possible.

Both All Pro Painting and Woodmasters sand the deck back to its bare wood. Sanding can help open up the wood's pores, so the new coating absorbs better, Persky says.

The other option is to start with a formulated wood stripper. A stripper loosens the old finish residue, making it easier to rinse off the deck with a power washer or hand scrubbing. Most decks require only one application, but thick residual stains and paints may need an additional coating. Wood strippers are formulated for the type of coating on your deck (oil-base, water-base, latex, etc.)

After stripping and rinsing the deck, a wood brightener is used to neutralize the stripper.

Here's the part you'll see -- clear solution, oil, stain or paint.

Although the deck will look better after cleaning, especially if using a brightener, applying a new finish is a must. This top coating sealer is the deck's protective barrier.

"You can tell the difference, after just a few weeks if you put two boards under sunlight, one with sealer and one without," Ismaili explains. "An unprotected board cracks in the sun. Sometimes it will cup. When the board is sealed, water beads up and can't penetrate the wood. You won't get dry rot."

Dry rot is decay caused by fungus that significantly weakens the wood.

Choosing a finish can be overwhelming because of the number of products and types available. The best ones should repel water and block the ultraviolet (UV) rays that age and fade the wood's natural color.

-Water repellents come in clear or tinted. They prevent moisture from being absorbed into the wood.

-Clear solutions offer a layer of protection that brings out the wood's natural color, but because many contain no pigment, they offer limited UV protection.

-Semi-transparent oil-based stains help restore and retain the deck's natural color. It goes on thicker so it may take longer to dry; most products recommend applying only one coat. Most of these products last two to three years.

-Semi-transparent water-based stains are like oil-based except they are a thinner coat. That means they may dry faster and a second coat can be applied.

-Opaque or solid deck stains and paints are often used to mask decks with poor quality wood and uneven appearances. Deck experts warn that solid stains and paints wear and weather more quickly than clear and semi-transparent, so they likely would need to be reapplied every year. They are also very difficult to reverse.

"A lot of people who buy houses that have paint on the deck want it removed," Persky says. "We have to sand and strip that off. It's very tedious and very expensive."

These finishes are best reserved for vertical structures, such as rails and columns, that aren't subjected to foot traffic.

Not liking our home disrupted by home improvement projects, my husband and I wanted something that would last as long as possible.



All Pro Painting offered us the four-year plan.

Ismaili introduced us to Cabot's S.P.F. Deck and Fence Finish, a natural wood-toned finish with built-in water sealer. The company says its "revolutionary" coating can be applied a few hours after rain or surface cleaning. (Most products recommend waiting 24 to 48 hours.)

Best yet, it comes in three shades and three pigment tones. The maximum pigment can last as long as 48 months.

At \$36 a gallon, the product is costly, especially since it takes two coats. Initially, we decided to apply this finish to the deck planks and beams and use a less expensive but closely matched color stain on the rails, lattice and overhang.

But after Ismaili applied samples of both to one of our railings, we quickly decided it was worth an extra \$150 to use the S.P.F. finish on the entire deck. (That bumped our grand total to \$2,470.) Smart move. Less than four days later, the deck looked practically brand new.

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Ann Tatko-Peterson "[Hit the deck! How do you start when it's time to refinish?](#)". Oakland Tribune. Aug 25, 2007. [FindArticles.com](#). 29 May. 2008.

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