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# MAKE YOUR NEXT DECK THE ONE YOU'LL KEEP FOREVER.

## OUR PANEL OF DESIGN EXPERTS SHARES THE SECRETS OF

# Deck Success

BY RITA STRICKLAND, ASLA



Photographer: D. Randolph Foulds

*A successful design knits together house, deck, and yard. Deck privacy walls, above, repeat the home's gable roof shape and clapboard siding. Below: Gentle, extra-wide steps ease passage to the yard.*



Photographer: Roy Inman

## Decks have become a staple

of the American landscape, and for good reason. Not only are they fairly easy and inexpensive to build, they're also the most practical way to create usable outdoor living space on sloping lots.

Yet as common as decks are, really great ones are rare. All too often, they are cramped and characterless squares broiling in the sun. That needn't be the case. With careful planning, a little imagination, and the advice of our panel of professional designers, you can have a deck that's as comfortable and inviting as your family room. Before you start building, check with local authorities regarding codes and permits, then adhere to their guidelines exactly.

### Design Basics

Quality in, quality out. That's the real secret of successful deck design. Before you jump to the aesthetics of your deck, invest some time in a step-by-step assessment of what you need.

**Step 1.** "The first task is to determine what you want your deck to do for you," says architect Clifford Boehmer of Mostue and Associates in Cambridge, Massachusetts. "Think of the deck as an outdoor room that captures space from the outside, expanding the interior and making it feel more spacious."

You might need a spot where you can relax and enjoy the view of your garden. You may need space for entertaining large groups. Your deck might function as a play area for children. Make a list of your needs so you can size the deck appropriately.

If outdoor dining is on your list, for example, landscape architect Tait Moring of Austin, Texas, recommends 10x14 feet as a bare minimum size. "That's comfortable for a regular-sized table and chairs, but it doesn't leave you much room for anything else," he says.

Although your home's floor plan and the lay of your lot may restrict deck size, give yourself plenty of room whenever possible. "The most common mistake people make is designing decks

too small," says landscape architect William T. Smith of Atlanta. "When space is at a premium, a small deck may be the best you can do, but it's cost-effective to increase the size while you're at it if you possibly can."

**Step 2.** "Always start by drawing the floor plan of the house and the entire lot as well, including all existing landscape elements," Boehmer says. Because the deck will physically or visually link the rooms inside with features outdoors, it's impossible to design a great deck without taking both areas into consideration. Use the site plan you've drawn to record all the factors that may influence your deck design. "Don't get hung up on the details before looking at the biggest possible picture," Boehmer cautions.

Think about circulation patterns between the proposed deck, the house, and the yard. For entertaining, make sure there's flow from indoor living areas. For outdoor dining, access to the kitchen becomes important. "You want a smooth transition from inside to outside," Smith says. "Everything must work together."

Pay attention to the views you'll have from the deck area, both good and bad. Note on the plan those that need to be blocked and those that deserve emphasis. "Properly designed, a deck can allow you to experience the outdoors without being forced to look at the cars parked ten feet away," Boehmer says. "Don't be afraid of restricting your perspective; it can only increase your appreciation of the views you really want to see."

And don't just look around; look up. "In cities where there are few trees overhead, a trellis built above the deck supporting dense foliage can block out the visual clutter created by taller buildings next door," he adds.

Consider the view into your property from the neighbors' homes, as well. "When you're on a deck, you're usually up in the air where everybody can see you, so privacy can be a big factor," Smith says. Mark the plan to show where screening will be required to avoid the feeling of being on display.

Also note on your site plan any other conditions

*For interest, break up a big deck with angles or levels. An energetic, zigzagging plan, below, creates discrete sections for dining or enjoying a spa.*

*A simple trellis screen secludes this small deck right from its neighbor and visually balances the height of the two-story home.*



Photographer: Stephen Cridland



Photographer: Jessie Walker

that may influence your design, from prevailing breezes to the noise from a neighboring schoolyard. For example, if part of the proposed deck area is hot and sunny in the late afternoon, show that on your plan. You may want to include an overhead structure there for shade. Show existing trees that may affect the shape of the deck, and include any power lines or underground utilities that may interfere with construction.

**Step 3.** If you've carefully followed the first two steps, the third step—developing the basic layout of the deck—almost accomplishes itself. You've thought carefully about how you'll use the deck, so you have a good idea of the size it should be. You know where you need screening, view control, and shade. You've analyzed how it should relate to your house and yard, as well as to the surrounding landscape.

When each of these factors is considered, you'll begin to see the deck take shape. As often as not, that shape *won't* be a square or rectangle. Even if it

## BEAUTY THAT LASTS

*To keep your deck beautiful for years:*

- Use quality fasteners that won't rust, stain, or otherwise mar your deck. Use galvanized nails or screws, stainless-steel fasteners, or undermount nails and clips. Talk with your lumberyard professional.
- Treat your deck with a sealer that penetrates the wood. A sealer creates an essential barrier against water to fend off rot and to minimize warping. Treat wood decks as soon as they are completed; reseal every year or two.
- Some sealers have UV-inhibitors to prevent sun damage on decks that get lots of direct light.
- Unlike sealers, the paint or stain used to color a new deck usually requires a waiting period before application. Follow the instructions on the product label.
- Wash away dirty gray. If deck boards become dull, dirty, or mildewed, use a deck wash to clean, brighten, and condition the decking. Then seal to forestall future damage.



Photographer: Rick Taylor  
Builder: The Building Firm, Atlanta

## Deck Success

For lasting good looks, this gracefully bowed deck was built with materials chosen for durability. The wood is a premium grade of precolored, pressure-treated pine. The lattice skirting is vinyl.

### DECKING DECISIONS

*New products and old favorites give you a wide range of choices for decking material. See our Resources section, page 106, for addresses of manufacturers and associations that can provide more information.*

#### New Options

- Imported natural hardwoods. Sustainably harvested from dense, tropical trees, these woods offer a beautiful, furniturelike appearance and outstanding durability. These woods are extremely strong and stable and naturally resist fire and decay; they are often used commercially in boardwalks.

Because the wood is so dense, you'll probably need a professional (or professional nailing tools) to install the decking. Look for these woods in specialty lumberyards. Trade names include Iron Woods, a group that includes ipe, jarrah, and bangkirai; and Pau Lope, which is Brazilian lapacho.

- Wood-polymer lumber. Environmentally friendly and easy to live with: Those are the claims of Trex decking, Mobil Chemical's lumber made from recycled wood waste and plastic grocery bags. According to the company, Trex will not rot or splinter and offers excellent traction. The material is available in natural (which weathers to gray) and colorfast brown.

- Vinyl and plastic decking boards. Already popular in the Southeast, vinyl deck boards offer the lure of "maintenance-free" decking. Manufacturers say there is no upkeep and no splintering because the boards snap onto the joists with special clips rather than nails. Higher quality products will resist UV rays, have a nonskid surface, and resist damage from extreme cold. Generally available in white, gray, or brown.

#### Tried and True

- Redwood. A long-time favorite, this premium domestic wood has a handsome red hue that weathers to a brown-gray. Redwood is stable and naturally rot-resistant.

- Cedar. Another naturally rot-resistant wood, cedar is noted for its strength, light weight, straight grain, and freedom from knots.

- Pressure-treated lumber. Economical and readily available, pressure-treated pine, fir, and other softwoods are chemically treated to resist rot and insect damage. Most pressure-treated lumber has a greenish cast that weathers to a silvery gray. Some premium varieties come precolored, prestained, or treated with a built-in water repellent.

is, you may want to vary the footprint of the deck simply for visual interest!

After all that, the rest is just ...

#### Details, Details, Details

As is the case with interior rooms, it's the details that make deck design work. Inside, you've probably repeated many design elements, such as wood trim or molding, from one room to the next for continuity. Don't let that pattern stop at the back door.

"I look at the inside of the house to see what the interior appointments are," Smith says. "If things are very straightforward and simple, that will influence how I design the [deck] details. If very elaborate, I take a cue from that."

Moring agrees. "Just as an example, if the architectural style of the house is very formal, you might have the balusters on the deck milled to match those of a staircase inside and use a similar style of handrail," he explains. Allow garden features to influence your details, too. "There may be a fence or gate with a design that can be picked up in the deck," Smith says.

**The Posts.** Although single 4x4-inch posts (the nominal size of common deck posts) may be adequate structurally to support your deck, they can seem spindly and insubstantial. "They look like toothpicks," Smith says. One solution may be to upsize the posts to 6x6s. "Even then, if the deck sits high above the ground, it may look as if it's on stilts," he adds.

Consider clustering three posts in an L shape at the corners, or encase smaller posts with a box made of 2x10s to form a simple column. If your posts are made of pressure-treated pine for durability, Moring suggests building the encasement out of redwood. "It's a much more attractive wood than the pine is," he asserts.

For additional strength and longer life, Smith often supports decks on metal posts, dressing them up as suggested above. "And I've also used brick or stone around the metal posts, depending upon the materials used elsewhere on the house," he says.

**The Steps.** The number of steps you'll need depends upon how high the deck is and the height, or rise, of each step. "A six-inch riser with

a fourteen-inch tread [or step surface] is a good, comfortable riser-to-tread ratio, but you don't always have that luxury," Moring says. If the deck sits high off the ground, your steps may need to be steeper.

For high decks, avoid a single, long flight of steps if possible. "Start the steps along one side of the deck, then wrap them around the corner as they go down, incorporating a landing every so many steps. That way it won't look and feel like a fire escape," Smith says. "All those steps can be a daunting obstacle physically, but the landings will provide you a couple second's rest and also be more appealing to the eye."

Or, you might consider designing the deck on different levels that step down toward the ground. The first level might be even with the interior floor; the next, three or four steps below that; and so on, if space allows. Never use fewer than two steps between levels; a single step is difficult to see and invites accidents.

For decks that sit lower to the ground, Smith suggests designing steps as though they were to be built of brick or stone. "That would be a gentle garden step, which might have a sixteen-inch tread and a five-inch riser," he says. "And if the deck is really low—say only three steps off the ground—you can wrap the steps around the entire deck, which adds a lot of excitement to the design. And the access is so much better than if you had a four- or even six-foot-wide step."

**The Decking.** Decking is laid most often in a simple pattern running perpendicular to the joists. Yet there are many ways to give it additional personality. "One of my favorite ways to dress it up is to put a border all around to finish the edge," Smith says. "I just run another board flat along the sides and against the cut ends of the decking and miter all the corners. It gives the deck a finished look, just as brick edging does to a lawn."

Decking can be jazzed up even more, but construction becomes more complicated. You can lay



Photographer: D. Randolph Foulds

Landscaped in levels, this yard's pleasing flow begins with a simple deck, above, off the back door. A patio and stone stair continue the smooth transition to the yard.

Clematis drapes the pergola of the cedar deck below, offering respite from the summer sun. A built-in planter brings garden color right onto the deck.

### "If I Could Do It Over"

In a survey of Better Homes and Gardens® Consumer Panel members, more than half the readers polled (54.8 percent) said that, if they could build their deck over, they would do something differently. Here's what they said would be their "most important" change:

Different design	37.6%
Maintain it better	27.1%
Different materials	16.5%
Build deck myself	8.2%
Different contractor	7.1%
Other	4.7%



Photographer: Michael Jensen