



ALL HANDS ON DECK

The garden trend that just won't die – invest in the best timber, or plastic, to create a feature to last, writes *Martina Lees*





◀ SLIDESHOW ▶ Trex decking in Island Mist in an indoor-outdoor dining room
JOEL BARBITTA



Britain has fallen back in love with decking, thanks to the lockdown. Three years ago we had become so bored with boards that Alan Titchmarsh apologised for setting off the decking craze of the 1990s with *Ground Force*, the garden makeover show he presented for the BBC. But over the past three months, three of the ten most searched-for DIY questions on Google were about decking — asking how to lay it (No 1), build it (No 3) and clean it (No 6). Now that you can invite in your own ground force, here's what you need to know.

Decking or paving?

Decks cover a multitude of sins, from bald lawns to cracked paving. “More often than not people choose deck because it solves a problem, but it also creates one in being slippery and [needing] maintenance,” says Tony Woods, the design director of Garden Club London, a Chelsea flower show gold medallist (budgets from £25,000, gardenclublondon.co.uk). “On a sloping site or a roof terrace decking is an obvious choice.”

It is quick to fit — taking two

people one to two days on average — and requires less groundwork than paving, so tends to be cheaper. Installing a 15 sq metre deck in a small garden costs from £1,000 for softwood, £2,400 for hardwood and £3,000 for premium composite boards.

Timber decking “is not a fit-and-forget option in the way a hard landscape patio is,” says Jason Orme of the Virtual Homebuilding & Renovating Summer Show (taking place July 24-25, homebuildingshow.vfairs.com). “If it is not maintained well, it will deteriorate rapidly.



Wood will take on moisture . . . The more direct sunlight it gets, the more it warps and changes.”

Which decking is best?

Most decking at DIY shops is softwood, such as pine, starting at £15 a sq metre. Without annual treatment it “goes bumpy and cracks within two or three years”, Woods says. Even with maintenance its lifespan is no longer than a decade. “It amazes me that developers will sell £5m penthouses with cheap pine decking.” Hardwoods such as ipe and balau last longer and usually age to a silvery grey, but are more expensive (from £38 a sq metre) and harder to install. If you choose timber, look for boards with the DeckMark symbol from the Timber Decking and Cladding Association.

A composite material or a plastic deck is the most robust. Unlike wood they do not warp, crack, rot or splinter. “Even three or four years ago they looked quite plasticky. Now there are some really good products, comparable in price to hardwoods,” Orme says.

For his wealthy London clients, Woods prefers Millboard (from £62 a sq metre, championtimber.com). “It’s plastic, which sounds horrendous, but isn’t. Every board is made individually in a reclaimed oak mould, so it has a natural kink that looks like real oak when it’s laid.”

Hand-coloured by the



Trex Transcend decking in Gravel Path at a rural home in Lancashire

Douglass family at their Warwickshire factory, Millboard decking combines polyurethane and mineral stone into a low-maintenance resin board with a 25-year guarantee. It has been independently certified as low carbon. Supplied and installed, it rivals the cost of aged sandstone on a level surface, typically costing about

£220 a sq metre, Woods says.

Orme recommends Ecoscape composite decking, made of 55% reclaimed wood fibre and 45% recycled plastic bottles (from £53.89 a sq metre, pavingsuperstore.co.uk) with a warranty of up to 25 years.

Woods warns that wood fibre in a poor-quality composite can “rot within



itself and start to flake. I bought a composite bench a few years ago — it has got mushrooms growing out of it.”

According to Trex (uk.trex.com), a popular composite brand that offers a 25-year guarantee, “Early generations of composite decking were ‘uncapped’, leaving them vulnerable to stains, fading, mould and mildew. The leading composite products available today are ‘capped’ with a protective outer layer that is bonded to the core.” Trex Transcend, the company’s bestselling boards, cost about £94.08 a sq metre.

Decking tiles are a quick fix, for example on balconies, but lack long-term structural integrity.

When does decking need planning permission?

If your deck is higher than 30cm or covers more than half of the garden area when added to that of the outbuildings and extensions, it requires planning consent and building regulations approval.

How do you build a deck?

Plan the structure on paper, then mark out the area with pegs and string. Clear, level and compact the ground. Lay weed-barrier sheet over the whole area and cover with gravel. For a low deck without posts, rest the sub-frame on a grid of concrete slabs placed under the corners and at 1.2-metre intervals along the outer frame and supporting joists.



Trex’s Tiki Torch variant, bordered with Spiced Rum
PAUL DEBOIS

Before you start sawing, lay the decking out in a dry run. For the frame you can buy kits that slot together. To build your own, space joists about 40cm apart at right angles to

the direction in which the boards will run. Check the frame is square and level, except for a gentle fall of 1cm for every metre to aid drainage. Leave a 1cm gap



between the frame and the house wall to prevent damp. “For composite decking, use a composite base, or the frame will rot,” says Wayne Perrey, the carpenter on TV programmes including *Garden Rescue*.

How do you lay deck boards?

Space timber boards with gaps of 8-10mm in between, so they won't bow when swelling up in wet weather. If there are drains, pipes or cables underground, consider building a trapdoor for future access. When cutting pressure-treated timber, brush the ends with wood preservative.

To stop screws from splitting the wood, drill thinner holes initially. Use stainless steel screws to prevent black rust stains, which can form even if you use galvanised screws — their coating often gets chipped when they are being inserted. Composite decking usually has invisible fixings.

Where do you find an installer?

Ask at your local timber yard, Perrey says. He gets most of his work through recommendations, including on a Facebook group for local mums. Trex has a network of contractors known as TrexPros, who have been trained to work with its composite decking. Or try the Timber Decking and Cladding Association (tdca.org.uk).

Installation is cheaper in winter, when there is less demand.

Which decking oil is best?

Look for decking oil that is highly water-resistant with UV filters to prevent fading. When new decking is manufactured, the cutting process often burnishes the surface, making it less absorbent, according to Liberon, which sells decking oil for £31.67 for 2.5 litres. To ensure the oil soaks in, leave new softwood decks to weather for two to three weeks, and hardwood for up to a year, before the first coat. “Make sure it's a dry day so water is not trapped,” Perrey says. Woods's team prefers Osmo decking oil, based on natural vegetable oils, while Orme chose Sansin Wood Sealer for his own deck (from £15.63 a litre).

“Thin the first coat with water or it will get a bit chewy,” Perrey adds. Apply a second coat within 15-30 minutes, before the first has dried fully, otherwise that will form a new absorption barrier. Liberon says hardwood is best oiled in very thin layers using a cloth, while softwood can be painted with a brush. With the angled Harris Ultimate Swan Neck Brush (£12.91) you can paint 40% faster than with a standard brush, the manufacturer claims. Combining it with the brand's extension pole (£31.17) enables you to paint a deck standing up. “The key is to take one's time during the

application process, wipe off what has not been absorbed using a lint-free cotton cloth, and work at a section at a time to avoid having to walk over it,” Liberon advises. Let the deck dry for 24-48 hours before using it.

How do you clean timber decking?

Clean and treat timber decks at least once a year, ideally before winter. Don't use a pressure cleaner, Perrey says. “It opens up the pores, then it rots faster.” Scrub it with a hard-bristled brush — not wire — to get rid of mildew. He then vacuums up dust before applying one coat of oil or stain.

Deck paints tend to flake within a year or two and should be recoated annually, Woods says. He uses paint only on hardwood decks in poor condition, and recommends Ronseal Decking Rescue Paint (£39 for 2.5 litre, diy.com).

Can decking support a hot tub?

The big question of lockdown. “Yes, if it has an adequate framework,” Woods says. Although don't plonk a hot tub — another garden trend of the pandemic — on your existing deck without advice from a structural engineer.

Opening image: a terrace in the garden of a Clapham home, also on the cover, designed by Garden Club London ■

