

FALL DECK CARE

If you have a wooden deck on your home, fall is a great time to inspect it and perform any needed maintenance so that it will be ready to enjoy throughout the fall and next spring. For inspection, all you need is a pocketknife, ice pick or small screwdriver (to use as a probe for decayed wood) and perhaps a flashlight (to look at structural members under the decking). Take a little time to look over your deck, top and bottom.

Underneath, it is important to look for signs of decay or insect damage that might be revealed by discoloration or splitting of the wood. Use your knife to probe areas you suspect of decay. If your knife can easily penetrate the wood (beyond the first quarter of an inch or so), you may have decay present. Areas most likely to deteriorate first are at the base of supporting columns. Look carefully at joints where the deck joists are attached to the home, and be sure not to overlook the surrounding areas of the home itself. Structural members with decay, excessive splitting, or loosening of fasteners should be repaired or replaced to maintain the usefulness and safety of your deck.

The upper part of the deck should also be inspected for decay, but here, it is more likely that you may find splits, loose fasteners, iron stain from nails or screws, or wood in need of refinishing.

Iron stain (dark black discoloration) may be removed with a saturated solution of one pound of oxalic acid in one gallon of hot water (*Warning:* Avoid ingestion and contact with your skin). Apply the solution, allow to soak for a few minutes, and rinse thoroughly with clean water.

Replace offending screws with non-corrosive deck screws.

Rough areas may be sanded with 80 to 100 grit sandpaper and refinished. For refinishing, use your choice of either water repellent or a semi-transparent penetrating stain. Finishes formulated especially for decks are usually preferred as these contain higher amounts of water repellents and are more abrasion-resistant than are stains and finishes intended for exterior siding. First clean the deck with a dilute solution of household bleach (1 quart bleach to 3 quarts water), rinse thoroughly, and let dry for 1-2 days before applying the finish according to the manufacturer's recommendations.

For more information on deck care, visit the USDA Forest Products Laboratory web site <http://www.fpl.fs.fed.us/> and click first on publications, then on the link entitled "Wood Deck Construction and Maintenance—Selected Publications."

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