

All hands on deck maintenance

By Doris A. Black

Wood decks are exposed to the elements year-round with very little protection, and eventually those elements start taking their toll. That's why the fall is the best time to prepare your deck for the ravages of winter and to slow down those signs of aging.

Here's what happens during the life of a deck:

A wooden deck properly built can last for 10 to 15 years. But a decade of enduring rain, snow, scorching heat, sun and wind tortures even the hardest of woods. When exposed to moisture, wood swells, and when it dries, it shrinks. This repetitive cycle year after year causes deck boards to bow or bounce, railings to wobble, screws to loosen or the whole deck to sway. But that doesn't necessarily mean it needs to be replaced. In most cases, if the footings are in good condition and there is no wood rot, the deck can be repaired.

Some of the most common deck ailments and remedies are as follows:

- The natural process of swelling and shrinking will eventually cause screws and nails to lose their grip. The most vulnerable areas are the handrails and railings, followed closely by deck boards. For loose deck plank problems, you don't have to remove the old hardware. Just add new nails and screws, doubling the support. Apply as much pressure to the area as you can to get a tight connection with the supporting wood, then use a nail punch to drive the new nails alongside the old ones. While you're

there, punch the old nail, too, driving it deeper into the supporting wood. For screws, experts say galvanized, coarse-threaded deck screws work best.

- As with wood exposed on the upper side of the deck, the joists which support the deck planking swell and shrink, too. As they shrink, they lose contact with the rim joists, affecting the seal. When this happens, you might notice the deck becoming wiggly or bouncy as it loses stability. To reinforce bouncy joists, install blocking. Blocking is the use of boards, the same size as the joist, in a perpendicular manner to the joists. This blocking shifts weight distribution from being completely on one joist to partially on adjoining joists. Another advantage to blocking is that when joists become stressed, they can tilt ever so slightly but enough to weaken the structure. Blocking helps to keep the joists vertical, which is when they are at their strongest. Joist hangers can add additional support if your desk was built without them. And if your deck has joist hangers that are no longer effective, try wedging a slender piece of wood shim between the joist and hanger for a tighter fit. This will usually do the trick.

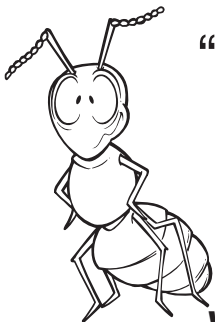
- For decks that sway, install cross braces between support posts. This not only provides additional post support but also reinforces the horizontal beam by giving support midway. Use 4x4's or better yet 6x6's with 45-degree angle cuts to brace the posts. Attach the cross braces with at least a 6-inch lag bolt. The longer, the better.

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