

## **FIX IT UP!**

*Bruce Turner*

### All Hands on Deck!

You bought your house for the view, and you've been enjoying that view from your wood deck for years. But now that old deck is showing wear or rot, and it's time to replace it. You can hire somebody to do it, or – if you've got the tools and the urge – you can do it yourself. It takes lots of saw blades and considerable patience, but the rewards are self-evident.

Once you've ripped out the old deck, you'll want to replace the underpinning and framing to make your new deck strong. Use pressure-treated lumber – it's permeated with chemicals that make it impervious to weather, dry rot and insects. And if you've heard about pressure-treated wood being unhealthy, don't worry – it's no longer the case. The chemicals used for pressure treatment today are safe and environmentally friendly. (Those chemicals do, however, dissolve galvanized nails – you'll need to use stainless steel fasteners instead.)

Now you get to decide what your new deck will be made of. One way to go is natural wood, with redwood the traditional choice in the Bay Area. If you choose redwood, definitely go for an all-heartwood grade – heartwood has natural tannins that resist rot and insects. Natural cedar is great, although it's hard to get in this area. The hot choice right now is Ipe (pronounced ee-pay), a Brazilian tropical hardwood (be sure to buy from a source that uses wood from renewable resources) that I think is absolutely gorgeous. It's very heavy, with lots of natural oils that make it weather- and bug-proof. It's also so dense that conventional fasteners won't work – you'll need to assemble it with blindside fasteners that mount under the boards. Ask your lumber store pro to show you how they work.

The second alternative for decking material is a composite made of recycled wood dust and plastic. Weatherbest, TimberTech and several other companies make polymer composite boards that are beautiful, easy to install and guaranteed to last 25 years with no rot or bug problems. The other advantage to these new-generation composites is that they are low-maintenance, requiring only occasional soap-and-water cleaning. But you'll need to cook carefully on a composite deck – drop something oily, and the composite could soak it up and stain permanently.

Natural wood requires a bit more care – it lasts longer if you stain or seal it, but you'll have to re-do it every couple of years. Lots of people prefer to just let the wood age naturally, and the only maintenance required is a yearly power wash, usually with a weak bleach solution, to get rid of mildew. And stains can sometimes be sanded out.

Whichever boards you decide to use, do yourself a favor and pre-drill them. Using deck screws is a whole lot easier than hammering all those nails, and in my opinion it makes for a stronger and more attractive deck.

While we're talking about replacing existing decking here, much of this advice also applies to the construction of a brand new deck. But that sort of project moves you into a whole different world of planning – a new deck must be designed based on how you're planning to use it and what you plan to put on it. A hot tub, for example, can weigh two or three tons when full, so you'd better have a well-braced deck.

We'll come back to that in a future column.