

Home Improvement & Remodeling

How to

Select the best deck

BEFORE YOU START designing the deck of your dreams, consider how you'll use it.

Do you want to barbecue with your family? Relax in a hot tub? Sunbathe? Escape from reality?

The function should determine the design of the deck, experts said.

Browse Web sites of businesses that install decks for ideas. Suffolk County Deck & Fence, with offices in Bohemia and Massapequa, displays a gallery of decks on its Web site, www.deckfence.com.

If you expect to host large crowds, choose a deck that allows people to move freely from the deck to the house and include wide stairs to garden areas or exits, said Dave Tibbetts, president of Atlanta Decking and Fence, a company in Georgia.

You should also consider the surroundings, he said. "Establish a focal point, whether it's the woods behind your home, sitting area or an arbor, and build your deck to frame that area or structure," Tibbetts said.

On the other hand, a deck can also be used to divert attention from unattractive areas. If you have slopes in your backyard and or unusable areas, a deck can provide more usable space, he said.

If you're close to a loud or busy street or noisy neighbors, you may want to include fences or privacy screens, experts said.

In determining the size, consider the dimensions of your backyard as well as your home.

"Much as a four-car garage can overwhelm a tiny one-story house, a big deck can spoil the proportions of the country cabin," said Evan Galen of Evan Galen Architects, based in the Hamptons.

If you build a large deck, consider using a geometric design to eliminate that "basketball court" appearance, Tibbetts said.

And if your lot isn't very large, don't build the multilevel deck.

You also have to decide if you want a deck attached to the house or free-standing. If you're building the deck yourself and are concerned about removing the siding from your house, you might want to build a free-standing deck. While that will require some extra digging, it could give peace of mind, according to landscaping.about.com.

As for the color, decks on ground level should blend with the surroundings, so experts recommend using natural tones. Second-floor decks should be coordinated with the house color and trim, but that could mean using contrasting colors: light honey-colored house with dark honey-colored deck, Tibbetts said.

Numerous choices for the material are available. Composite lumber, a

He highly recommends composite deck material, one of the widely sold alternatives to wood.

While vinyl and plastic lumber, which are made of milk jugs and grocery bags, don't absorb water, neither material quite looks like wood, the MSN site notes. But if you decide to go for it, buy a brand that has a UV inhibitor in the material itself, not sprayed on after production, according to houseandhome.msn.com.

Synthetic or composite material may cost more up front but last longer, keep fading to a minimum, and won't require staining or power washing over the life of the deck, saving and maintenance costs, experts advise.

Pressure treated pine, which is easy to install, is one of the strongest structural softwood species for framing, and its high density resists wear and prevents decay and termite damage, Tibbetts said.

Pressure-treated wood is the least expensive material, but it may require a lot of maintenance with staining and pressure washing, one expert said.

Some of this lumber is treated with a preservative instead of arsenic, so it's better for the environment, according to the MSN site. Another bonus: it's darker, so it doesn't need to be stained.

Rot-resistant cedar, cypress and redwood naturally defend against rot and decay and are easier to saw, but they are also softer so they more easily dent and mar, the MSN site notes.

Chris D'Auria, co-owner of Suffolk County Deck & Fence, recommends composite decking with vinyl handrails for the lowest maintenance.

"Think about the long-term maintenance," he said. "Do you want constant upkeep every year?"

Experts also recommend checking with your neighbors to see what materials have worked for them.

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combination of plastic and wood, can be resistant to rotting and splintering in inclement weather, Tibbetts said. But it could accumulate mold, so it should be protected accordingly, he said.

Virgin vinyl, a man-made material, doesn't look as natural as some of the other composite materials. Furthermore, grooves in the surface to make the vinyl slip-resistant can collect dirt and need to be hosed down monthly. And the vinyl pieces are hollow, so they feel different than a solid deck and may even squeak when walked on, Tibbetts said.

Tips

- Do some research to get a sense of what design you would like.
- Consider using software so you can envision what the deck would look like, or check out Web sites that let you design decks.
- Contact three contractors to get an estimate.
- Pressure-treated wood is cheaper but requires more maintenance. Composite lumber resists rotting and splintering but could accumulate mold. Some natural woods resist rotting but are soft and easily dent.
- You also have to decide if you want a deck attached to the house or free-standing. If you're building the deck yourself and are concerned about removing the siding from your house, you might want to build a free-standing one.
- Make sure you know building codes to ensure that your deck complies with regulations.
- Before you meet with a contractor, determine your budget. You can keep costs down by choosing a standard design, forgoing curves or unusual shapes. Also, standard lengths — 10-, 12- and 14-foot boards, planks and joists — can keep costs down, according to Dave Tibbetts, president of Atlanta Decking and Fence, a company in Georgia.