



DIY Guide to Building a Deck

Do-it-yourself tips for building a deck for your home.

A well-designed deck is a great addition to any home. It's where you entertain guests, bask in the afternoon sun while reading a book, and watch your kids play. For those of us who live in sunny Southern California, a deck is a year-round space – and an absolute must-have.

A quality deck can last for decades and provide a lifetime of memories. That's why it's important to get it right the first time. In J&W Lumber's DIY Guide to Building a Deck, the decking experts share insights on:

- What you need to know before building a deck
- How to determine where to build your deck
- When decking permits are required in Southern California
- What materials are right for your deck
- The best ways to illuminate your new deck

Save yourself the headaches and read this guide before you launch into your new decking project.





What You Need to Know Before Building a Deck

Building a new deck can be an exciting affair, but there are a few key things you should learn before breaking ground.

What's Your Budget?

Sure, you may have a round number in your head. However, it's important to be honest with yourself and determine exactly what you want out of your deck – and what you are willing to pay for it. There are a lot of options for decking design, material and functionality – many that fit even the most modest budget. Having a ballpark budget in mind will help determine what materials and designs you can consider.

Think Outside the Box

If your new deck is intended to replace an existing deck on your property, don't make the common mistake of simply recreating the original. For starters, it may no longer be up to the current code. Recreating an old look also robs you of some creative freedom you could use to build something entirely new. Though you may be tempted to save money and time by using the existing understructure and simply adding a new deck on top, it could end up costing you more in the long run.

Speak with a contractor or your local lumber yard to determine which materials are ok to repurpose and which aren't. You don't build a new deck every year. The structure you build will likely be there for decades or more. Spend time thinking out what you really want and what will add to the value of your house.

Know the Decking Code

Just about every city and municipality has a detailed (very detailed) code for building a residential deck including a permit process you must follow in order to be approved. See the decking code/permit section of this guide for more information.

Learn to Talk Like a Pro

Speaking the language of a deck builder helps you get exactly what you want out of a deck by ensuring nothing gets lost in translation. There are plenty of resources out there, from how-to guides to online courses to blogs that will help you speak the native language of building and carpentry. Sharpen your skills before talking to a contractor or your local lumber yard.

Decide on a Style

You have a variety of materials to choose from for your new deck. The right decking materials depend on your budget, where you build your deck and – most importantly – what you want it to look like. From natural softwoods like Redwood and Cedar to beautiful hardwoods and even composite materials that last a lifetime, there’s bound to be a material that fits your preference or style.

Do some research to see what’s out there, and visit your local lumber yard to check out the merchandise in person. If you want your deck to match a portion of your home or property, bring a sample into to your lumber yard to find the right match. Determine whether you want the deck to be stained or natural, and how you want the deck to be nailed or screwed down. Do you want a more craftsman look with visible screws or something with cleaner lines and hidden fasteners? Getting a deck design you want and will enjoy for decades is priceless.

Are You Ready to Maintain It?

Before you build your deck, determine how much effort you are willing to put into both building and maintaining it over the years. Natural wood decks are gorgeous, unique and cost-effective – but they do require ongoing deck maintenance, from cleaning to sanding and staining. If you want a more “set it and forget it” deck, you’re better off spending more on a composite deck, which require near-zero maintenance and can be cleaned with a spray down with your garden hose.





Where Should You Build a Deck?

Far too often, homeowners make decisions about where to put their deck in haste. Whether you are adding new decking to your home or replacing one you inherited, consider the following factors before deciding where to build your deck.

Sun/Shade

What part of your yard gets the most sun and shade? More importantly, how much sun and shade do you want your deck to receive? Sun and shade can be a delicate balance.

Useable Space

One of the biggest mistakes homeowners make with decking is the failure to increase or enhance useable space. Often, a deck will be built over yard space that could be used better as garden, shed or simply yard space.

Take stock of your yard. Are there sections that are currently unusable – like a graded slope or rocky portion? Building your deck above unusable space will increase your home's living area with functional space.

Optimal Space

Most decks are attached to the front or back of a home, but that's not a hard and fast rule. Building a deck around your pool, for instance, can create a resort atmosphere in the comfort of your own back yard. A deck that covers a dry, dusty portion of your yard can help beautify your property – and keep dirt out of your house. Make sure you have a good idea of the type of use you expect from your deck before you decide where to build it.

Deck Space

Once you've determined the best spot for your deck, determine the size of the actual deck itself. The area of your future deck will help ballpark the final size, but you must also consider the items you plan to have on the deck – a BBQ grill, a table, an umbrella, a hot tub, etc. – before making your final plans. Draw a map to scale, then draw the approximate size of each of the items you plan to have on the deck. This will give you an idea of what will realistically fit. More often than not, homeowners underestimate how much space is needed for each item. A single lounge chair can take up a lot more space than you think.

Deck Permits: Do You Need One?

Building a deck can be quick and painless, especially with help from our decking experts. Familiarizing yourself with the various laws and permits required for outdoor decking in your area will save you a major headache in the future. You may be asking: do I need a permit to build a deck? The simple answer is...maybe.

The 30” Rule

As a simple rule, you need a permit for any deck that is higher than 30 inches off the ground. This rule applies to most decks. Anything lower than 30” is often considered a patio or “porch deck,” and a permit is not typically required. The reason for this and the reason for many of the other permissions you’ll have to wade through is safety. Any deck higher than 30” requires deck railings – and these railings must adhere to certain rules as well.

Of course, this rule may change based on your location, but 30 is the standard. Any deck that exceeds the 30” rule is going to need to be permitted and built to standards set forth by the municipality, city, and state. The permitting process is a simple matter of taking the time to research which permits you need and what parameters must be met to secure approvals.



State, City, Local

Part of the complexity around permitting is that homeowners may have to navigate multiple processes for securing approval. States, cities, local municipalities and even HOAs often require permits and those permits often contain varying rules and regulations. As complex as the process can be, permits are in place for a reason, to ensure your hardwood deck leads a long and most importantly, safe, life.

Permits are issued by governments to ensure that any outdoor building project adheres to building codes, which are in place to ensure structures are safe. Cities, municipalities, and HOAs may also regulate additions and structures based on how the look will affect the neighborhood. The first step in your project should be to familiarize yourself with the various permits you need to secure to build your deck.

Permit Primer

If you live in California – particularly in the San Diego area – study up on the following permits before you get started on your new deck. If you're reading this from another part of the country, your local permits may differ slightly, so make sure to dive into your local ordinances.

The California Building Standards Code

Any building, structure or addition in California is subject to these regulations. For outdoor building and home projects, check out the California Residential Code, which is organized by chapter and available online in a surprisingly simple to navigate format. If you want to go straight to the section on decks, click here.

City of San Diego, Residential Decks

Now it's time to review your plan with the City of San Diego. This guide covers the rules around residential deck building in detail and even contains handy charts that let you know what measurements are needed depending on the size of your deck and the type of wood used. Also included are illustrations that show how decks should be built to stay within code.

Before you get started on any work, including digging holes for posts, check to see if any permits are required. Permits can take a little bit of time to acquire, so start this process early.





Deck Materials: What Is Best for Your Deck?

There's plenty to consider when choosing deck material, so do your homework before you settle on the perfect solution.

Understructure Materials

Your first inclination when selecting wood for your deck will be to think about what it will look like. But before you choose the look, you must first determine the understructure. The understructure is, literally, the foundation of your deck. Materials should be sturdy, hardy and built to support a heavy load. If you plan on having a heavy grill – or something heavier, like a hot tub – determine how that will affect your understructure. Make sure your understructure has additional posts to support those sections.

For understructures, use Pressure Treated Lumber or steel. Both are rot and insect resistant, sturdy, and can bear the necessary load of a well-traveled deck. You'll need to determine the right amount of posts for your deck and what size beam to run for your post spans, which is based on a number of factors including size, height, weight-bearing needs and code.

Maintenance: Wood vs Composite

Typically, wood decks require more maintenance than composite decking solutions. However, the maintenance factor can also depend on the type of look you are going for with your deck. For example, if you are interested in a finished look, all types of wood will require some maintenance, but if you are looking for a grey tone to your deck, you won't need to do any regular maintenance.

The Surface

Now for the fun part – selecting the “look” of your new deck. Whether you ultimately decide on natural wood or composite, you'll have plenty of beautiful options to choose from. Softwoods can be stained a variety of shades and composite decking comes in a broad array of colors to meet just about any style preference.



Softwoods

Softwoods, like Redwood and Cedar (including variations like Western Red and Alaskan Yellow) are unmatched in natural beauty. These woods mimic the natural surroundings of California, creating a continuous space that blends your home with nature. Needless to say, there's a lot to like about softwoods. And don't let the name fool you – softwoods are rot and insect resistant. Softwoods can take on multiple personalities throughout the life of your deck. From natural coloring due to weathering to stained on a yearly basis, softwoods can great a deck that has an evolving style over time.

Hardwoods

Hardwoods, like Mangaris and Ipe, are the most visually stunning and impenetrable woods available. The structure of these woods is incredibly dense, making them all but impervious to termites and decay. Hardwood decking will look a lot like a hardwood floor inside of your home. Sourced from the tropical forests of South America and Indonesia, Mangaris and Ipe feature rich colors and tight grains. Hardwood is the go-to choice for high-end decks, as well as docks and yachts throughout the world.

Composite

Composite decks from manufacturers like Trex and Fiberon truly offer the best of both worlds – the beauty of wood without the ongoing maintenance. A simple hose-down is all the maintenance you need for a composite deck. No sanding, no painting, no staining. Constructed using a combination of wood pulp, plastics and polymers (each manufacturer uses a different formula), composite decks are completely resistant to weather and insects, and most include manufacturer's warranties. Additionally, new deck technology for composites makes the pricing on par with softwood solutions.

Railing

In order to comply with safety codes, some decks will require railings. There are lots of options for deck rails, depending on your construction, visual preferences, and view considerations. Like the surface of your deck, you can utilize wood and composite railing material. But other options, like glass, metal, and cable railing are available too. Glass and cable railings can help provide an unobstructed view from your deck, while wood and composite can give it seamless continuity. There are also various forms of post caps, lighting and other add-ons that can make your railings functional and beautiful.

Deck Lighting Options

Deck lighting has come a long way over the past couple of decades. There are dozens of new technologies and products that make installing lights in and on your deck simple. A new line of products is taking the danger out of deck lighting. Low voltage, bright LED deck lights are simple and safe to install. If you can confidently place a plug into a basic electrical outlet, you can install new deck lighting.

Plug and Play

“Plug and play” wiring is just what it sounds like – you plug it in, and turn it on. Here’s how it works: Because LED lights use far less power than traditional bulbs, they can be powered by a 12-volt direct current (DC) – as opposed to your home, which is run on an alternating current (AC). With a DC, the power only runs one way – to the bulbs. This, combined with the low voltage, make the light very safe to install. Simply unplug the lights when you need to adjust. In fact, you won’t even get a small shock if you touch an exposed wire. Lights are connected in strings, like Christmas lights. You’ll need to plan where to run the lighting, but the electrical work is as simple as plugging it in.

There are various brands that offer “plug and play” wiring for deck lighting at your local lumber stores, including a J&W Lumber favorite.

– Dekor Lighting



Design a New Atmosphere

Not only is LED deck lighting simple to install, there are a variety of styles and placements available. Here are a few of the choices:

Recessed

Lighting your deck from the bottom instead of from overhead is a revelation. With recessed deck lights, the light will be spread evenly across the surface, creating a soft but bright mood for your outdoor living space. Bottom lighting also gives you a clear view of the stars, since you won't have to worry about staring into a floodlight.

Post Caps

Think of your deck's post caps as lighthouses. LED post cap lighting illuminates the borders of your deck, giving it a clean look, and lighting the way for guests coming in from the dark.

Stair Lighting

LED stair lighting, like post caps, will help guide you through the dark. The real bonus though, is how it looks. Stair lighting is understated, yet alluring. Also, it adds a necessary, yet lovely, element of safety to the stairs.

Depending on how much you want to light your deck up, there are other options as well, including balusters, post lamps, and glass and LED panels. With LED lighting for your deck, you're the architect, designer, contractor, and electrician – and it's far easier than you think.





When it comes to building your dream deck, your options are almost endless! If you would like to discuss your options, or just get some helpful tips, contact the decking pros at J&W Lumber or stop into one of our showrooms!

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