



Deck Planning 101

Your source for creating your dream deck.

You've been dreaming about a beautiful deck, where you can spend time with your family, friends, and neighbors. It's time to make that dream a reality.

At J&W Lumber, we've been helping homeowners and contractors with outdoor building projects since 1957. If you can imagine your dream deck, we can provide the support to build it.

Constructing your new deck requires planning. Whether you plan to hire a contractor or do the job yourself, there are a number of factors to consider before getting started.

In Deck Planning 101, you will learn the basics of building a new deck - including everything from determining the right design to suit your needs, the right materials to build your deck and how to maintain your deck once it's built.



The Right Deck Design for You

How will you use your deck?

A great deck can be a place to entertain guests, quietly read a book under the sun, grill up your favorite meats and veggies, or simply enjoy some time with your family. A deck is essentially an extra room for your home – an outdoor living space with flexible functionality. Like any other room, though, space and size will limit what you can do on a deck.

What will you have on your deck?

Before you get started building your dream deck, think about how you will use it most often – and what you'll put on it. Will your deck have a grill? Extensive patio furniture? Piles of kids' toys?

A great way to figure out how the space of your deck will work with your lifestyle is to lay out string on the ground of the estimated size of your deck, then place furniture, your grill and anything else that will have a home on your deck in that area. This exercise will help you envision what's possible – and what's not – on your future deck.

Research Rules, Regulations, and Codes

Municipal structural codes can be complicated, confusing and often frustrating. Before you begin construction, consult with your local municipality on the details of what you can and can't do. Don't just assume you can build a roof deck to get that pristine ocean view you always wanted. Chances are, if your neighbors don't have a roof deck, you probably won't be allowed to build one either.

The construction of everything from decks to bird feeders can be subject to regulation, but there are some types of decks that may not (and we stress may) require approval. Often, non-elevated decks – those typically less than 30" in height – are considered patios, and do not require approval or handrails. Each locale has a different set of rules, so it's best to check before you begin.



Consider Simple Design

When dreaming up your deck design, the urge is almost always to “go big.” However, bigger isn’t always better. Bells and whistles are nice, but a simple, open-space deck will still provide you with a versatile solution that offers space, easy maintenance, and easy construction and planning. Of course, that doesn’t mean it needs to be plain.

There are some really cool design quirks and add-ons that won’t crowd your space or bog you down in construction and planning. Beauty is in the eye of the beholder, but we find that simple and flexible often yield the best results.



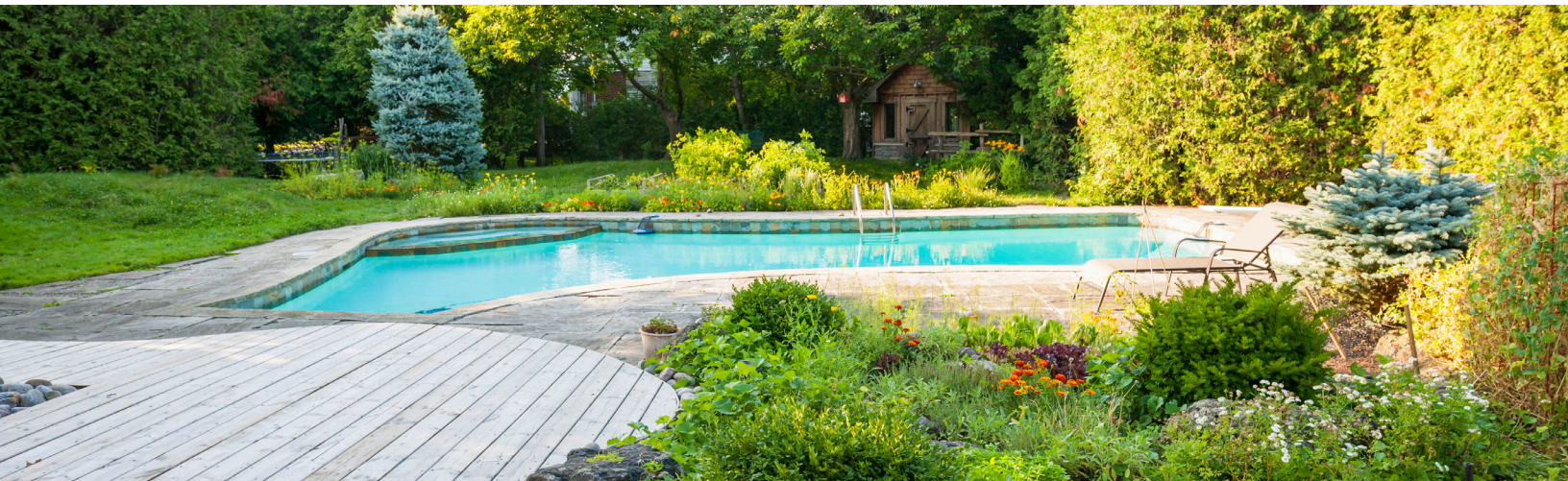
Create or Maintain Your View

The view from your deck, of course, depends on where you build your deck and what your view looks like to begin with. Creating or maintaining a view from your deck requires you to consider a few variables (aside from code).

Positioning: While you may not have the luxury of building your deck anywhere on your house, positioning plays a key role in the atmosphere of your deck. Consider how much sunlight your deck receives from any given position. Those in desert climates may opt for more shade, while coastal homes with cooler temperatures might want maximum sunlight. Also, consider nearby trees and foliage which can not only affect sunlight, but expose your deck to falling leaves and debris.

Height: Elevating your deck can provide you with a beautiful view you might not have had at ground level. But elevating your deck to meet the view isn't as simple as pressing a button. The higher your deck, the more variables apply – code, material, support structure, etc. When planning the height of your deck, always take into account how it will affect the rest of your project.

Railing: The construction style of your railing can add extra pop to the look of your deck, but it can also obstruct your view. You won't always be standing up when you're enjoying your deck so think about what the view would look like if you were laying on a lounge. For deck railings with minimal visual obstruction consider cable railing.



Choose the Right Deck Material

Perhaps the most important feature of your deck is the material. The style, look, usability, construction, and level of maintenance all depend on which materials you use. There are plenty of options when it comes to your deck's understructure and surface.

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 structure. The understructure is, literally, the foundation of your deck. Materials should be sturdy, durable 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.

For understructures, the best choices are 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, which is based on a number of factors including size, height, weight-bearing needs and code.

The Surface

For your deck's surface, there are numerous options that are both hardy and visually pleasing. Softwoods, like Redwood and Western Red Cedar, have a natural beauty that give your deck a true outdoor feel. Softwoods require some maintenance, but can be very affordable. Composite decking, which is generally made from a combination of wood and plastic, is a cost-effective, gorgeous and virtually maintenance-free option. Hardwoods, like Mangaris and Ipe, offer the most durable – and elegant – options for decking. While more expensive than softwoods and composite decking, a hardwood deck will surely be the envy of the neighborhood.

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 - with a little love and care, they'll last a lifetime. Softwoods can take on multiple personalities throughout the life of your deck. From natural coloring due to weathering to stained on a yearly basis, they can give your deck a new look whenever you choose.

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. Installing a hardwood deck can be challenging, so make sure you're confident in the process if you plan on installing the deck yourself.

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 resistant to weather and insects, and most include manufacturer's warranties. When composite decking first came to market, it was more expensive than most wood solutions. But the emergence of new manufacturers and new technology has resulted in affordable pricing on par with softwood solutions.



Railing

In order to comply with safety codes, decks may require railings. There are a lot 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.

Maintenance

When planning your dream deck, the ongoing maintenance is often an afterthought, but it shouldn't be. Your deck will be your outdoor space for many years to come and it will require care throughout its life. The amount of care will depend on your materials.

As a rule of thumb, softwoods generally require more maintenance than hardwoods – and both require more maintenance than composite decking solutions. If you are the type of person who can't wait to get to the next weekend project, a natural wood deck is for you. If you're more of a "set it and forget it" type, you may want to consider a composite deck.



Deck Maintenance Strategies

Just like any other natural substance, great looking wood can turn into not-so-great looking wood rather quickly – especially with outdoor structures like decks. That gorgeous, shiny deck that was bursting with vibrant color and detail just last year may now have a grey and dull look. The elements have a way of muting the true beauty of wood.

There is no need to worry though – wood is resilient. You can clean or refinish your wood deck to its original beauty without completely refurbishing or replacing it. Try one, two or all three of the following wood rehab strategies to bring your deck back to its original beauty.

Washing

A good washing may be all your deck needs to look great again. But there's only one way to find out. Start off by taking a close look at your deck. Are there any loose nails? Surface stains, like chewed gum? Excess debris? If so, secure the loose nails, scrub off the external stains, remove all loose debris and sweep down the deck with a push broom.

***Pro Tip:** Use a flathead screwdriver or a wall scraper to remove debris from in between your deck boards.*

Next, give your deck a thorough hose-down. If you don't have a power washer, consider renting one (they typically cost less than \$100 per day). Power washers can tackle tough stains and remove sun-damaged wood fibers with ease. But make sure not to set the pressure too high as it could damage the wood or existing stain. Once your deck is dry, examine the way it looks.

Good, but could be better? Then it's time to.....



Cleaning

If it's been a while since your deck has had any real love and care, that's OK. You can restore your deck without completely stripping and sanding it. Often, a chemical cleaning, stain and reseal extends your deck's life by years. If your deck is visibly stained and dirty, you'll want to apply a [deck cleaning solution](#).

There are a number of deck cleaning solutions on the market – including bleaches, peroxides and acids – that are effective for different types of dirt and stains. [This report](#), from the U.S. Department of Agriculture Forest Products Laboratory, is a great primer on deck cleaning solutions.

Pro Tip: Mix your own deck cleaner with household bleach, water and dish detergent.

- Prep your deck by clearing all debris and gather your protective gear (goggles, gloves and breathing masks should always be worn when working with strong chemicals).
- Mix your solution, if needed, according to manufacturer's instructions.
- Empty your cleaning solution into a bucket, then pour the solution carefully across sections of your deck.
- Use a push broom or mop to quickly spread the solution evenly among the deck boards.
- Make sure your entire deck is covered in an equal amount of solution, then push the excess liquid off of the deck using your push broom.
- Finally, wash the deck down with your power washer or hose (preferably power washer), then go inside, have a drink and let the sun dry the deck.

Once it dries, you'll be amazed how much better your deck looks. At this point, you may be satisfied that your deck looks great, and is ready for a weekend barbeque. But probably not. You've come this far, and you're actually enjoying the process, so why stop?



Staining

Staining your deck is a sure-fire way to make it look brand new – and add years to its life. A quality stain – on the right type of wood and properly applied – will not only sit on the surface, but will penetrate through the wood’s pores and into its fiber to provide enhanced protection from moisture.

Deck stains come in a variety of compositions, including wax, oil-based and eco-friendly options. They are available in multiple shades, ranging from sheer to solid colors. Choose a stain based on the type of deck wood and the age of the wood.

Pro Tip: Use a semi-transparent stain for older wood decks, which will help retain its original beauty and give it a fresh look.

The process of staining a deck – and the equipment involved – is a lot like painting a wall. Staining-specific brushes and pads, rollers and trays are your tools. Brush your stain across boards individually, spreading the stain evenly. Don’t let any part of the stain dry before applying an even coat.

Pro Tip: Stain deck boards two at a time, lengthwise.

Once you’re finished, allow 24 hours for the deck to dry. Keep an eye on the kids and the dog – foot prints on wet stain can become “fossilized” on your deck. Depending on the condition and type of wood, you may want to apply a second coat. Should this be the case, wait until your first coat is fully dry, then repeat the process.

Human civilization’s relationship with wood, including your relationship with your deck, works like all relationships – with love, care and a little elbow grease, it might just last a lifetime.



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 your local J&W Lumber store for a quote, a 3D model of your project, to check out an in-store display, or to speak with one of our outdoor building experts about your project.

Contact J&W Lumber Today!

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