

Get your deck ready for spring and summer

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As the days get longer, there's nothing like barbequing and entertaining friends on your deck. But before you pass out those invitations, make sure your deck has weathered the winter and is ready for its seasonal duty.

The abuse a deck surface takes from the weather, foot traffic, barbeques, and food and drink spills can create both surface and structural problems.

"To make your deck last, clean it thoroughly every one to two years and re-stain every two to four years," says Mark Clement, host of the radio program "MyFixitUpLife." "It also helps if your deck is made from a natural, durable wood, such as Western Red Cedar, which holds oil based finishes for an extended period of time."

Here's how to get your deck ready for use:

- * **Clear Out:** Clear all furniture and potted plants off the deck. Then inspect the deck for dirt and pollen buildup. Sweep it clean of debris that may have fallen during winter. For safety's sake, make sure there are no nails sticking up from the deck or from any posts.

- * **Floss Between Planks:** Clean between the planks and boards of any horizontal surfaces so rain can drain and air can flow between them. Reducing standing water and increasing airflow will limit the amount of moisture that can collect and stay on the surface of the plank, thereby making your deck last longer.

- * **Keep the Finish Sharp:** Application of a quality wood stain or finish and periodic retreatment over time will prevent discoloration and degradation of your deck and extend the wood's lifespan. Keep in mind that natural woods that are sustainable and durable, such as real cedar, can take and retain a variety of stains and finishes for more extended periods. Such woods are natural looking, as opposed to the faux finishes used on man-made composite products.

- * **Elevate Planters:** Direct contact between planter boxes and wooden surfaces can trap moisture and leave stains. Elevating them or placing them on rollers will release the moisture and make them easier to rearrange.

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* **Beware of Welcome Mats:** Mats can collect moisture and dry out too slowly, which can lead to water damage and/or wood rot. After precipitation, be sure to dry out the mat and allow the deck to dry.

* **Watch Out for Your Grill:** Grease from your grill is hazardous to your deck, so place it in an inconspicuous spot with a hard rubber door mat underneath it to keep your deck free of stains. If grease drips onto your deck, use a household cleaner to wipe it clean.

For more advice on caring for decks, visit www.wrcla.org .

"It's easy to forget that decks need maintenance and care just like your lawn or roof," says Clement "By performing routine checks and taking care of the warning signs, homeowners can extend the life of their decks so they can be enjoyed for years to come."