

Secrets to Great Decks

by Jim Kneiszel



Some decks
are too small.
Some decks
are too large.
Make sure
your deck's
just right . . .



Left:
Make room for furniture.
Shown here, Camino Real synthetic wicker from the WeatherMaster collection of Laneventure.

Below:
Create nooks and corners.
Photo courtesy of Decking Northwest.

Upper right:
Be mindful of traffic flow.
Photo courtesy of Decking Northwest



Why does it seem like so many decks either turn out like a runway or a phone booth? Like something tacked on willy nilly to the cabin? Like an afterthought?

We all know someone who got so carried away with lumber and a circular saw that his deck ended up dwarfing the cabin. You almost need an intercom to call the kids over from the other end of the deck.

Then there's the puny deck at the neighbor's cabin down the lane. A few drinks into that last cookout and things were getting a little too cozy with everyone tripping over each other. Looked like a game of Twister without the big colored dots.

And then nothing's ever in the right place on the deck. Remember when your friends came over last winter and complained about how far the hot tub was from the back door? Now they teasingly refer to that night as the Donner Party.

Denny Vanden Avond wanted to avoid all those mistakes when he built his Legend Lake retreat in northern Wisconsin. He considers his deck the most important "room" at the cabin and wanted it to be just right. So instead of having just any old deck slapped onto his cottage during construction, he took a year

to become acquainted with the slope of his lake lot, the traffic patterns of his family and the appearance of his neighbors' decks.

The biggest lesson Denny and his wife Pat learned about deck design is the same advice many professional deck builders find themselves giving over and over again in the early stages of planning: Think big and live large. Leave a little elbow room. You want to be able to spread out the newspaper, flop out in the sun on a chaise lounge, or invite a few friends over for brats and beer. And if selling is in your future, consider that improvements to outdoor gathering places, such as decks, dramatically increase the resale value of a second home. (*See "Fine-Tuning Your Getaway," July/Aug 2001 CABIN LIFE magazine.*)

The Vanden Avonds' deck contractor gently steered the couple toward a bigger deck, bumping out the front section of the wraparound porch from 10 to 12 feet and another walkway area from four to eight feet.

"I'm so glad we went larger," Denny says. "It really makes a difference when we have a party. We've had 15 to 20 people up there and nobody's cramped for space."

Some Simple Rules

Skimping on size is the biggest mistake people make when they



Left:
Build deck at least 12 feet wide. Photo courtesy of Decking Northwest

Below:
Separate spaces for kids and adults. Photo courtesy of TimberTech.



design a deck. Cabin owners generally underestimate how much time they'll spend on the deck taking in the views of the mountains, lakes, rivers or forests that drew them to the cabin lifestyle in the first place.

Think of the deck as an extension of the cabin; it's your outdoor living room. Plan sufficiently for evening cookouts, or lazy parties with friends and relatives who visit for the weekend. Be sure there's enough room for adults and kids to separate for their own, often socially incompatible, pursuits. That first Fourth of July party is no time to find out that the deck isn't big enough.

Randy Varga, owner of Portland, Oregon-based Decking Northwest, learned this rule the hard way. For a friend, he built a 10-foot-wide deck that was supposed to accommodate a table and chairs. It didn't work.

"What you get is a really, really wide walkway with space only for chaise lounges," he said "Anytime you wanted to get by, you had to move chairs and work your way in."

That was when Varga learned the rule of 12s, one which has served him well in building hundreds of decks in the hills overlooking Portland. A patio table is typically about five feet across. Add three feet for chairs on either side of the table and you have eight feet. Pull the chairs away from the table when you want to relax with a glass of wine after dinner and you're up to 10 feet. Adding two more feet allows you to get around the table without sending wine glasses flying. For that reason, he doesn't recommend any all-purpose decks smaller than 12 by 12 or 12 by 14 feet.

Varga has learned other no-nonsense spacial lessons over the years. Want a hot tub? Figure for a seven-foot-square tub: three feet to walk around the outside of the tub, another foot for a railing and you have a 14-by-14-foot space. Varga made his own hot tub area 16 feet by 16 feet, which – it turns out – is too big. When he leans on the railing, he feels

like he can't make himself be heard over the din of the bubbling waters.

Do you entertain a lot? Varga suggests a deck with nooks and corners to encourage small groups of people to congregate or to provide romantic spots for couples to grab a moonlit kiss. Add a wide railing around the deck so people have a place to set their drinks or plates of food or a place to park their video cam.

"I want to create these natural conversation areas where people can sit in the corners and talk forever," Varga says.

Useable Space

Need to make the most of a small deck? Add railings all the way around even if you aren't required to for height considerations. In Varga's many years of observation, he's learned that people won't use the outside two feet of deck if there is no railing. They will stand or sit 24 inches from the edge of the deck. But if the deck has a railing, they will lean on the rail and stand at the edge of the deck.

"It's a builder's trick," he says. "A small deck with handrails creates a lot of useable space." Safety as well as efficiency prompts Varga to use handrails in many cases where municipal codes don't require them. And he prefers vertical spindles instead of the horizontal ladder designs kids will be tempted to scale as a play activity.

Traffic Patterns

When he designs a deck, Varga thinks in terms of canoeing on a river. He develops natural flowing traffic patterns and low-traffic eddies where people can escape the rushing current of activity. The traffic patterns have to lead to a logical destination, like a door to the kitchen upstream and stairs to a beach or garden downstream.

One trick to make it easier to analyze traffic patterns requires a trip to the hardware store for a few cans of spray paint. After deck plans

6 ideas for a dandy deck:

Designers offer these classy-but-inexpensive touches to transform a modest deck into an inviting outdoor lounge:

- Set deck boards at an angle: Diagonal decking adds pizzazz at a small cost. It also gives the deck builder something to do with small scraps which can be worked into the corners. Other common options are diamond, herringbone or basket weave patterns.
- Cut the corners: Cut 45-degree angles into a few corners of the deck to add interest and soften a boxy look on a larger deck. Take it a step further by adding small niches for conversation areas or a place to park the grill.
- Use inlaid wood: Ed Smith, of Deck Designs of Brentwood in Tennessee, sometimes dresses up a plain deck with an inlaid design in contrasting material which reflects the homeowner's interests. He put a 6-by-4-foot inlaid football in a deck for Tennessee Titans football player Kevin Carter and the profile of a duck in a duck hunter's deck.
- Choose contrasting colors: Whether you use a composite plastic decking product which comes in a variety of colors or two types of wood, add a distinctive look with contrasting handrail spindles or deck supports.
- Consider composites: If you don't want to restain or replace the wood on your deck, upgrade from pressure-treated pine to newer materials like TimberTech or Trex composites. Material cost is higher, but the composites require no maintenance and should last longer.
- Utilize arbors, screening or handrail details: A few hours labor and a small investment in materials can yield a unique design while protecting the deck from the harsh sun and nosey neighbors. Arbors help direct traffic flow and provide a place to plant vining plants. Wrought iron or copper elements within a handrail design can make a deck stand out.

Composite decking such as TimberTech, shown here, requires no maintenance.





are down on paper, spray-paint the outline in the back yard. Go crazy adding tables, chairs, the grill, anything that will be used on the deck. The paint is easier to work with than a string and wooden stake outline and is a quick way to see if plans are practical.

“We’re creatures of habit. Everyone likes to take a shortcut,” Varga says. “Make it a nice clear shot to get to where you’re going. Keep it simple and straightforward and limit the area that I can get off the deck. I don’t want a 12-by-20-foot deck with three exits and nowhere to put anything that’s not in a pathway.”

Look for out-of-the-way areas that will be used for relaxing pursuits and put cozy conversation-inviting furniture there. Park the

grill near the door that leads to the kitchen. And just as you would do indoors, put the dining table close to the kitchen.

Hot Tubs

Especially in cooler regions, the hot tub should be as close as is convenient to a doorway into the cabin. Studies by the hot tub industry show that the frequency of use drops off dramatically the farther the tub is from an entry. Varga’s magic hot tub number is 15 feet. Useability drops considerably beyond that. Avoid placing a separate hot tub deck any farther from the house – unless you’ve got a really great spot for a wood-fired hot tub.

Modest souls will also want to consider putting the hot tub out of

Above:
Place hot tub out of sight of neighbors. Photo courtesy of Decking Northwest.

Right, top:
Take advantage of the view. Photo courtesy of TimberTech.

Right, middle:
Design a custom deck. This TimberTech deck connects home with dock.

Right, bottom:
Create natural conversation spots. Photo courtesy of TimberTech.

the eyeshot of neighbors or incorporate some sort of screen into the deck design. Varga asks customers if they're going into the tub nude because that may change the tub's placement. Use a kitchen chair on the deck – about the same height as a seat in a hot tub – to check prospective views of the tub from various angles.

Varga also suggests people put the tub where it can be seen from the kitchen window.

“I want to supervise my 5-year-old and my 18-year-old when they're out there. I want to make sure the younger ones are keeping their heads above water and that there's no hanky-panky with the older ones,” he says.

Varga recommends different styles of decks for different kinds of family situations. For couples with young children, he always suggests a simple, single-level deck with careful attention to safety features like railings and steps. Older couples and families with older children may want more elaborate multi-level decks for entertaining.

Beautiful Decks

When Ed Smith designs a deck, he starts by surveying the site and quizzing clients about how they will use the deck. The owner of Deck Designs of Brentwood near Nashville, Tenn., has built many elaborate decks. But even when money isn't a consideration, Smith prefers simple, single-level decks with a few rich details, including angled decking, inlaid designs and contrasting colors in wood and composite material.

“I usually stay away from multi-levels. You won't use them,” Smith says. “Here you have an 8-by-8-foot space halfway down. It's neat and pretty and all that, but do you ever see anybody sitting there? I tend to go more toward being practical than beautiful. I like everything balanced, with steps leading to where you want to go.”

Smith aims to make decks that

are well-used. Most people, he said, have conventional needs in a deck – often choosing decks in the 16-by-24-foot range with areas for seating, cooking and lounging. More important than elaborate designs are decks that take advantage of both sunny and shady areas and put million-dollar views to the best use. He followed simple rules for his own 12-by-16-foot vacation home deck on the backwaters of the Mississippi River in southern Illinois.

Smith's deck is like an informal outdoor great room, a natural extension of his cabin's living space. It's a place to watch the sun go down while enjoying a big fat cigar and shooting the bull with his buddies. A place to shovel down a few hotcakes before an early morning tour on the bass boat. Why get fancy when an ample rectangular space will do the trick?

“I like to keep it simple, use it and enjoy it,” he says.

A Final Word

Most deck-buyers today take time to look around and do some research. Magazines, deck industry Web sites, do-it-yourself books and computer design programs are chock full of ideas. Those ideas can be morphed into a custom deck that will work in any vacation home setting.

But most cabin owners could benefit from a second opinion from an experienced deck builder or designer. Before you go out and spend thousands of dollars on an ill-conceived deck designed on the back of a napkin, consider consulting with a builder, home center or landscape architect for ideas.

And one last word of advice: Build big. Once you skimp, it's really hard to add on.

You can find writer-photographer Jim Kneiszel this summer hanging out at the family cabin in northern Wisconsin. His deck is big enough so he doesn't have to rub bellies with his brother-in-law when reaching for the brats.

