

# THE HOMEOWNERS JOURNAL

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## HIGH-TECH DECKS

### Plastic planks that don't crack, rot, or splinter

by **Jeanne Huber**

For all the lounging done on them, wood decks require a lot of work to maintain. They have to be cleaned frequently. When paint or stain fades and chinks because of the weather, they need to be recoated. Eventually, as sun and rain cause the wood to crack, splinter, and rot, boards will have to be torn up and replaced. To keep a wood deck looking its best takes time and money.

Building with nonwood decking can change that. This durable and low-maintenance alternative to wood will never split or rot and requires no paint or finish. Made from either recycled milk jugs and grocery bags or new plastics like vinyl, it accounts for 10 percent of the \$3 billion-plus spent each year on residential deck boards and railings. Colors are mixed into the material, from white to dark to faux wood grain. Textures range from smooth to rough. Some types are solid and heavy, while others are hollow and lighter weight. And because much of this decking



can be cut, shaped, and fastened almost like wood (some use simple clips), building with it is just as easy. Prices are competitive with those for cedar or redwood, but expect to pay 15 to 20 percent more than for pressure-treated pine.

Homeowners interested in nonwood planking will find two main types to choose from: all-plastic and composite. All-plastic lumber consists of plastic plus additives such as ultraviolet inhibitors (to provide protection

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## TROUBLESHOOT YOUR TURF

### Surefire solutions that'll turn a thin, patchy, or weedy lawn into a barefoot-worthy expanse of green

by **Ashley Womble**

Unless you're a perfect caretaker of your lawn (and, really, who is?), prepare for another round in the turf wars this summer. You'll have to deal with a full frontal assault from the dandelions, of course. And an attack from the crabgrass. But you'll face more stealthy opponents, too: root-chomping grubs and microscopic mildew that turn the grass from green to gray or brown.

"If a lawn is neglected, or cared for in a hit-or-miss way, it gets weak," says This Old House landscape contractor Roger Cook. "And that's when weeds, insects,

or fungal diseases become a major problem." Little wonder that last year almost 50 million homeowners bought products to fight these invaders.

But as in most battles, the best defense is a strong offense: doing everything right to cultivate healthy turf. That means giving it up to an inch and a half of water per week; aerating and dethatching annually so water and nutrients can get down to the roots; mowing with a sharp blade to the right height (ask your local garden center what's best where you live); and fertilizing in spring and fall.

So promise yourself—and your turf—

you'll do that this year. In the meantime, here's how to conquer the most common turf problems you're likely to confront this summer.

#### FUNGAL DISEASE

**Symptoms:** Circular patches of yellow-to-brown grass; or blades with tiny red threads. **Culprits:** Powdery mildew, brown patch, dollar spot, and fusarium patch; or red thread. These fungal diseases can take hold of stressed turf.

**Solutions:** Though lawns will generally recover from small areas of infection, if a fungus is progressively marching

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**Decks...***Continued from page 1*

against the sun) and color pigments. Composite boards are made by mixing plastic with sawdust or other natural fibers. Both products have their pros and cons.

### The Composite Option

Composites are by far the most popular type of nonwood decking, accounting for 80 percent of all products sold. The reasons for this are simple. Composites look, feel, and act more like wood. That's because they contain about 50 percent wood dust from sawmills, in addition to recycled and virgin high density polyethylene (HDPE). (At least one company uses polyvinyl chloride (PVC) instead of HDPE.) The fiber content improves plastic's stiffness, reduces its tendency to move as temperatures change, and roughens its texture for improved skid resistance. It also makes the material easier to cut and install than all-plastic decking. Composites do not require a finish of any kind, making them easier to maintain than solid wood.

Even so, there are some drawbacks to composite lumber. Because of the natural fibers in the material, it absorbs water (although not nearly as much as solid wood decking), making it vulnerable to decay. It can stain and discolor from food spills or grill grease. Plus, textures in the wood tend to hold dirt, which can be a good environment for surface mold and mildew. As a result, composite decking needs to be cleaned periodically with a scrub brush and an off-the-shelf deck cleaner or a detergent that contains bleach. "Composites are not no-maintenance decks; they're low-maintenance decks," says Randall Firmin, regional sales manager for USPL, which makes both composite and all-plastic decking. Also, with the exception of a few brands, most composites — no matter what color they start out as — will eventually weather to a light gray from the sun. Composites carry 10-year warranties: better than wood (which has none), but less than the 50-year offers for solid plastic decking.

**Composite decking looks and behaves more like wood than all-plastic does because it contains about 50 percent wood dust in addition to plastic. Most boards have solid or tongue-and-**

**groove profiles and are screwed down just like wood. Some have hollow cores to cut down on weight.**

### All-Plastic Decking

The biggest advantage to using all-plastic decking is that it needs virtually no maintenance. It can't absorb moisture and so isn't vulnerable to decay because it's made entirely from recycled polyethylene or virgin PVC. To clean off dirt or spilled food, simply hose off the boards or wash them with soap and water. Mildew can be scrubbed off with a deck cleaner or detergent that contains bleach. Plus, plastic decking can be thinner and lighter than wood or composite decking.

The downside is that plastic lumber doesn't look much like wood. And some products, particularly the hollow ones, make a noisy clatter when walked on. "It's just too 'plastic-y' for many people," says Marc Richmond, project manager for the Green Builder program in Austin, Texas. Sunlight will fade the color of a plastic deck board and eventually cause its surface to turn chalky. (Long-term testing shows there's no loss of strength

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*"Composites are not no-maintenance decks; they're low-maintenance decks"*

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or increase in brittleness.) And except for products made of vinyl, which remain cool in the sun, all-plastic decking tends to heat up more in bright sunshine and to stay hot longer than either wood or composites. "A redwood-color deck can become too hot to walk on barefoot," says Cynthia Kravitz, vice president of Phoenix Recycled Plastics. "When you hose it down, though, the heat dissipates instantly."

One concern about nonwood decking is how slippery it can be when wet. According to Richmond, who installs plastic and composite decks, all-plastic planks seem to be a little more slippery than regular wood, whereas composites are not. "Most plastic boards are smoother on top than composites, which

have a rough texture to improve slip resistance," he says. To ensure safety, manufacturers of plastic and composite decking have started submitting products

to slip-resistance tests set up by ASTM International. So far, however, a nationwide safety standard has not been established. "If you have any concern with slipperiness, go with a rough-textured composite," says Dr. Prabhat Krishnaswami, vice chair of an ASTM committee on plastic lumber standards.

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## GREEN ALTERNATIVES FOR BATHROOM CLEANING

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Humidity caused by warm water makes the bathroom an ideal place for germs, mold and mildew to thrive. A range of commercial products are available to help you battle the problems that can lurk in the bathroom.

For some people however, cleaning aerosols, detergents, artificial fragrances and ammonia can cause a variety of health issues, such as skin irritation or breathing problems. If this is the case, or if you would like your bathroom to be an environmentally friendly area of the home, it may be time to consider some green cleaning alternatives.

Here are a few tips for green cleaning in the bathroom:

**Drains:** Use hair and food traps to prevent clogged drains. To degrease, pour a half-cup of baking soda down the drain, followed by a half to one cup of vinegar. Let it bubble for 15 minutes; rinse with hot water.

**Mold:** Keep the bathroom area dry to prevent mold and mildew. Run bathroom exhaust fans anytime you bath. Opening windows causes condensation on all surfaces, thus leading to mold and mildew growth. If your bathroom does not have fans, considering having them installed. Wash walls and tile with borax.

**Toilet bowl:** Spread one cup of borax around the bowl, then drizzle with one-fourth to one cup of white vinegar. Let it sit for several hours or overnight before scrubbing with a toilet brush.

**Tub and tile cleaner:** Mix together two-thirds of a cup of baking soda, a half cup of liquid soap and half a cup of water. As the last step, add two tablespoons of vinegar. Apply, scrub and wipe.

**Turf...** *Continued from page 1*

a fungus is progressively marching across your yard, look for a fungicide with the active ingredient thiophanate-methyl and follow the directions. For an organic fix, search out a corn-gluten mix that will cure brown patch and weaken most other fungi. Then nurse your lawn back to health by practicing good lawn-care habits: Avoid excessive shade (prune back trees and large shrubs, if necessary) and too many applications of fertilizer, herbicides, or pesticides. Carefully monitor your turf's moisture intake and never water in the evening.

**WEEDS**

**Symptom:** Fast-growing and unruly greenery that quickly overtakes surrounding grass.

**Culprits:** Crabgrass or broadleaf weeds such as dandelion, purslane, henbit, and chickweed that commonly pop up where soil is compacted and grass hasn't completely taken root. To check for compacted soil, stick a screwdriver into the ground; it should slide in easily.

**Solutions:** The first step is to eradicate any foreign invaders. The best approach is to pull them out by hand using a weeder or a hoe. This will also loosen the soil in affected areas. Or use a liquid herbicide in a hand sprayer to spot-treat an infestation. If weeds are too plentiful to be pulled, check your garden center for a "weed-and-feed" blend of granular fertilizer and herbicide that will kill weeds without harming turf types commonly grown in your area, or look for an organic fertilizer with corn gluten. Be sure to follow the directions on the box exactly, as some formulas must be applied during a dry spell or need a 24-hour breather with no foot traffic. From here on out, mow up to twice a week during the beginning of summer when grass grows swiftly, and raise the mower blade an inch during hot or dry periods. Water well as the summer heats up, and your turf should naturally overtake the weeds. In the fall, open up compacted soil—poke holes with a pitchfork over a small yard, or rent a power aerator for large yards and overseed the lawn. You may want to follow up with a pre-emergent herbicide next spring.

**INSECTS**

**Symptom:** Brown turf that becomes

loose enough to lift like a mat.

**Culprits:** White grubs, a catch-all name for root-chomping beetle larvae, including June bugs, Japanese beetles, and masked chafers. To be sure that's what you've got, cut a square foot of infected turf and roll it back, looking for pale, half-inch- to inch-long C-shaped bugs. If you find more than six, treat the turf.

**Solutions:** Grubs are the biggest threat to lawns, and pesticides formulated with imidacloprid are proven effective. For an organic fix, spread powdered milky spore or lay down beneficial nematodes-microscopic worms that will feed on the grubs if they're present. With nematodes, timing the application with their life cycle is critical, so be sure to follow the directions on the box exactly. Both milky spore and nematodes can be ordered from some garden centers or online ([gardensalive.com](http://gardensalive.com)).

**Symptoms:** Irregular-shaped patches of brownish-yellow grass.

**Culprits:** Chinch bugs, gray-black, quarter-inch-long insects that suck moisture from grass and are most likely to attack St. Augustine and zoysia grasses in the South and Kentucky bluegrass in the North. To spot them, bury an empty coffee can, with both ends removed, at the edge of the affected area and fill it

with water. The bugs will seek out the moisture, then float to the top. If you see more than 10 after 20 minutes, you should address the problem.

**Solution:** Chinch bugs live on the surface, among thatch, so dethatching will reduce their numbers. To eradicate them completely, look for an appropriate insecticide with a pyrethroid ingredient. Longer-term, overseed with chinch-bug-resistant grasses.

**Symptom:** Patches of thin lawn with blades chewed off at the base.

**Culprits:** Sod webworms and tropical sod webworms, hairless cream-to-gray spotted caterpillars that grow into small, buff-colored moths at maturity. The tropical species that thrive in warm southern climates cause the most harm. To check for webworms, mix two tablespoons of mild detergent with two gallons of water; pour it over the infested turf. Any larvae will float to the top.

**Solutions** You can try flooding your lawn to drown them. Or choose an appropriate insecticide; in an organic product, look for the ingredients azadirachtin or spinosad. With extreme cases of tropical webworm infestation you may need to replace the turf with a resistant grass mix.

**Decks ...** *Continued from page 2*

**Most all-plastic decking is made from virgin polyvinyl chloride (PVC) or recycled high-density polyethylene (HDPE). Some of these products have thin walls and hollow profiles, making them lighter than composites or wood but also requiring special installation hardware.**

**Installation Techniques**

Building a deck with plastic or composite materials is very similar to using wood, with a few notable exceptions. Plastics tend to shrink and swell lengthwise as temperatures fall and rise (wood changes in width with humidity). For that reason, manufacturers specify gaps where board ends meet, or they provide a variety of attachment options to accommodate expansion and contraction. Plastics and composites also lose some rigidity and can be vulnerable to sagging when temperatures soar. This requires

special joist spacing that can be as little as 12 inches, depending on the size and thickness of the decking material.

To cut composite or plastic decking, manufacturers recommend using carbide-tipped saw blades with 18 to 24 teeth per inch, to reduce friction and prevent the blade from gumming up. They also recommend drilling pilot holes for the screws because some decking tends to "mushroom" as it's fastened through the face, leaving a little ring-shaped bump around each screw head. Another strategy is to hammer the bumps flat, or to simply use self-tapping deck screws that limit mushrooming and eliminate the need for pilot holes. But the fastest way to eliminate mushrooming may be to use a new screw made specifically for nonwood decking. The TrapEase screw by Master Fastener uses a built-in secondary thread system to pull excess material down as the screw burrows in.