





BY CRAIG A. SHUTT

Decks

Continued popularity of outdoor living spurs more colorful, decorative decks with added accessories, lighting and structures as part of the program.

Photo courtesy of Perennial Wood

Deck sales long have been associated with upgrading homes and replacing existing projects, and marketers indicate that project interest is growing as the economy improves. But as sales rise, customers are looking closer at aesthetic options and expanding their definition of what “high performance” should mean as they extend their living space outwards.

“We’re definitely seeing a rebound in decking projects,” says Carter Welch, vice president of marketing for Mendocino Forest Products Co. in Windsor, Calif. “Our research shows that homeowners were delaying maintenance and new projects until the economy improved, and now those projects are starting up. Contractors and dealers are both seeing a fuller pipeline.”

Kleer Lumber in Westfield, Mass., sees such a strong trend that earlier this year it launched a new deck line to complement its trimboard products. “Our dealer customers told us that they saw real potential for bundling trimboard and decking products,” explains Jack Delaney, senior vice president of sales and marketing. “We felt we had a unique offering, and our reputation gave us a head start.”

Deceuninck North America in Monroe, Ohio, agrees the category is growing. In January, it created a separate division, Outdoor Living by Deceuninck, to highlight the company’s decking and railing products, including a new line of PVC deck boards. The product gives Deceuninck a premium line to flesh out its offerings, says Mark Lipsius, director of sales. “Cellular PVC products are definitely growing in the category.”

“There’s a lot more going on with outdoor spaces today,” says Jim Flickinger, brand manager with Perennial Wood in Kingsport, Tenn. “More people want to invest in their homes rather than move, and they want to spend more time outdoors. They look at their decks more as an outdoor room, so renovation of existing decks has become a big project area.”

Remodeling Drives Sales

New projects for existing homes have definitely been the driver, all agree. “Even when new housing was doing better, decks tended to be an afterthought or were left off,” Flickinger says. “Homebuyers often looked to upgrade once they could.” Premium products, especially composite boards and PVC, always were seen as an upgrade, so their sales weren’t as impacted by falling new-home sales. Now, even more homeowners want to enjoy their budget-minded “staycations” with better outdoor amenities.

“We’re seeing more activity by D-I-Yers,” notes Charlie Jourdain, president of the California Redwood Association in Pleasant Hill, Calif. That’s led to more kits for specific sizes of projects and accessories, such as railings and trellises, he notes. ➤

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Photo courtesy of Deceuninck

Paul Mackie of the Western Red Cedar Lumber Association, based in Vancouver, British Columbia, also sees D-I-Y business heating up. “In some cases, we’ve seen contractors advertising that they’ll do the heavy work—providing the substructure—and the homeowner can do the lighter work.” That also plays to homeowners’ desire to keep budgets tight while expanding their space. “Adding or repairing rather than moving up has become the trend.”

As these projects return, consumers are taking a more careful look at the aesthetics that are offered. Hardwood species definitely are proving popular, and customers want products that do more than simply give lip service to their resemblance to these woods.

Aesthetics Rule

“Deck purchases all start with aesthetics,” says Brent Gwatney, senior vice president of sales and marketing for

MoistureShield in Springdale, Ark. “In many cases, manufacturers walked away from aesthetics to focus on lowering their maintenance needs. But if customers today don’t like the look of the product, they’ll walk away.”

To that end, manufacturers are upgrading and expanding their lines, especially by adding new colors and multitone looks. “Colors have grown substantially in recent years compared to earlier, when more than 80% of sales were gray boards,” says Gwatney. More women are involved in the decision, he explains, and they want more style and color for this extension of their interior decorating. “The husband looks at the cost and the material, and the wife looks at what colors are available.”

“There’s much more attention being put on finishing details for PVC makers,” agrees Morgan Raganyi, marketing coordinator for Gossen Corp. in Milwaukee. Gossen has expanded its multitone products to target upscale species,

such as ipe, which is its most popular exotic hardwood look.

“The exotic hardwoods are definitely growing,” Kleer’s Delaney agrees. “Customers are really interested in tropical hardwood tones today.” Kleer’s new line features five solid colors and three variegated. “Dealer feedback has driven our color selection, and they want multi-colored boards.”

TimberTech this year introduced a line of solid colors to expand on the multitone boards it already featured, notes Kevin Brennan, senior vice president of sales and marketing for the Wilmington, Ohio-based company. “There is definitely a market trend to the variegated styles even though it’s more expensive,” he says. “Customers like the streaked look because it better mimics hardwood.” The company’s new solid-color line provides a lower price point while complementing the multitone products. “We want to ensure we have products at every price level.” ▶



Photo courtesy of Endeck

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Some companies offer two-colored boards by putting complementary colors on the two sides. That approach offers design flexibility for Deceuninck, Lipsius says, providing contrasting decorative colors that can be switched on-site if desired. “We’ve seen projects where the homeowner decided to flip the base and accent colors altogether once they saw how it looked,” he says. MoistureShield’s Gwatney agrees that two-sided boards are gaining attention, with its sales on these boards growing 27% last year. “They’re popular with contractors because they can just flip the board.”

Customers are looking to add more colors and style overall, Lipsius adds. “We’ve seen decks where they outline where the table will go, create a picture frame around the deck and create other

styles.” Gossen’s Raganyi agrees. “We’re seeing more design elements in the floor, like compasses and rosettes, as well as multi-tonal patterns. Contractors can be true artisans and produce creative deck designs when they have the chance.”

High-Performance Upgrade

Consumers also are taking a closer look at how “performance” is actually defined and which companies support their products best, marketers say. Contractors too are paying more attention to avoid callbacks or having to redo projects at their expense.

“Especially with PVC and composite products, the bar has been raised on what performance and low maintenance mean,” says Kleer’s Delaney. “Resistance



Photo courtesy of Trex

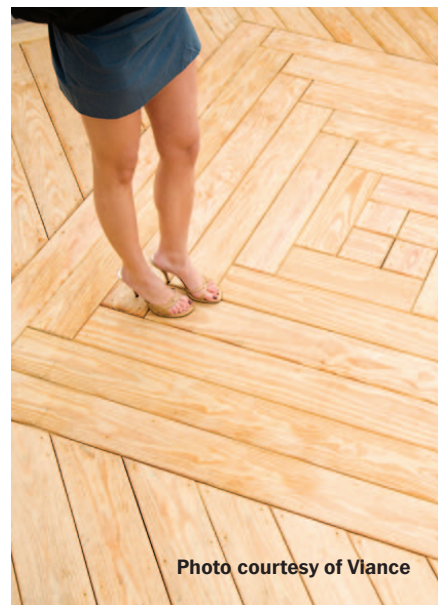


Photo courtesy of Viance



Photo courtesy of Tiger Deck

to fading, staining and scratching have to be included now in addition to no rot or warping.” TimberTech’s Brennan agrees. “The category is still evolving as to what customers’ preferences are for each product. The market is still defining which are the ‘better’ and ‘best’ products.”

Adds Gossen’s Raganyi, “People are getting more savvy about what low-maintenance can mean. Some products may be lower maintenance than wood, but they still will need attention.”

Performance also is improving on treated-wood products, with new non-metallic preservatives for above-ground applications growing in popularity, says Huck DeVenio, manager of marketing communications at Wolmanized Wood in Atlanta. “They’re not much more expensive than previous treatments, but acceptance takes a little more time. Dealers are beginning to stock them, and they’re being used more.”

The gap in pricing between treated wood and composites or PVC gives dealers an opportunity to upsell treated-wood customers to products with better performance, he notes. “There’s a lot of room for selling treated wood with water-resistance and still providing a less expensive product,” DeVenio says. “We’re seeing more premium treatments because they can provide the quality contractors and homeowners want while still staying within a smaller budget. The economy is making people look to save money wherever they can while still getting the look and performance they want.”

Wood products can tout their low-maintenance qualities, says WRCLA’s Mackie. “The low-maintenance option for cedar decks is to let them turn gray. It provides a beautiful wood color that’s stable, and it still resists insects and rot.” Adds California Redwood Association’s Jourdain, “Redwood decks have a strong 25-year life cycle, and we consider that the life cycle for any deck before a homeowner looks to upgrade or replace it.”

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Warranties are becoming more important for consumers and contractors both. “Everyone is paying more attention to what they actually cover,” says Kleer’s Delaney. “They’ve become a bigger part of the conversation with dealers and contractors.” Some warranties promise to replace products if there is a problem, but they don’t pay for labor, he notes. “The contractor can’t pass that cost along, so he has to absorb it. So he’s more concerned about which products protect him.”

The added attention to low maintenance and warranty protection is helping encourage the trend toward larger and more elaborate decks, marketers say. “When a deck doesn’t require much maintenance, the homeowner becomes more interested in expanding it, because he won’t be spending a lot of time maintaining it,” points out Deceuninck’s Lipsius. Adds Perennial Wood’s Flickinger,



Internet Information

To learn more about these companies’ products, visit these websites

Companies in bold participated in this article.

Aurora Deck Lighting: www.auroradecklighting.com

AZEK: www.AZEK.com

California Redwood Association: www.calredwood.org

CertainTeed: www.CertainTeed.com

Cox Wood Preserving: www.CoxWood.com

Deceuninck: www.deceuninck-america.com

Deckorators: www.Deckorators.com

Duralife: www.DuralifeDecking.com

Endeck: www.Enduris.com/decking

Fiberon: www.fiberondecking.com

Fortress Railing Products: www.FortressRailing.com

GeoDeck: www.GeoDeck.com

Gossen: www.gossencorp.com

Great Southern Wood Preserving: www.GreatSouthernWood.com

Kleer Lumber: www.kleerlumber.com

Latitudes: www.LatitudesDeck.com

Mendocino Forest Products: www.getredwood.com/lbm

MoistureShield: www.moistureshield.com

Nature’s Composites: www.naturescomposites.com

North American Deck & Railing Association: www.NADRA.org

Osmose: www.osmosewood.com

Perennial Wood: www.perennialwood.com

Prova Railings: www.dolleusa.com

RhinoDeck: www.RhinoDeck.com

Seljax: www.seljax.com

Simpson Strong-Tie: www.strongtie.com

Southern Lumber Manufacturers Association: www.RealOutdoorLiving.com

TAMKO: www.TAMKO.com

Terratec: www.Terratec.info

Tiger Deck: www.tigerdeck.com

TimberTech: www.timbertech.com

Trex: www.trex.com

USP Structural Connectors: www.uspconnectors.com

VEKAdeck: www.vekadeck.com

Viance: www.treatedwood.com

Wahoo Decks: www.wahoodecks.com

Western Red Cedar Lumber Association: www.wrcla.org

Wolmanized Wood: www.wolmanizedwood.com

“A lot more decks are gaining amenities of all kinds and becoming outdoor kitchens.”

Green Building Plays Role

As with many products, the economy has impacted the value of sustainable-design benefits in the purchase decision, especially if they carry a premium. But there is still interest in “green” products if there is no extra cost. Wood manufacturers especially see more interest in getting back to natural materials. “Green products can do well if the price is right,” says MoistureShield’s Gwatney. “It’s a price-point market now, but if there’s no premium, customers love it.”

Adds Mendocino’s Welch, “Contractors definitely are getting more inquiries on green decking products and how homeowners can create more green outdoor-living space.” Mendocino worked with the Forest Stewardship Council

(FSC) to create a TV ad that was tested last year in the San Francisco Bay area. The program was expanded this spring. “Awareness of FSC certification is low, but when we explain it to customers, they want it, and it makes a difference to their purchase.”

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Wolmanized Wood’s DeVenio has seen less impact due to green-building awareness, especially among architects, as the LEED program gives short shrift to treated-wood products. But he does see growing popularity for wood products, pointing to the 2011 Deck of the Year winner from the North American Deck & Railing Association (NADRA),

which was built with treated wood. “That would have been unheard of a few years ago.”

Wood manufacturers also cite life-cycle studies completed for their products, which show the cradle-to-grave energy cost for wood being lower than for other

materials. (The studies are available at their websites.) The studies are most significant because they can form the basis for Environmental Product Declarations, which LEED does recognize. “There’s definitely a trend toward more natural and environmental-friendly products, and the EPD helps us show the comparisons,” says WRCLA’s Mackie. ➤

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A key category is railings, which includes clear-plastic panels, cables and many other materials. Sales depend on regional preferences and architectural styling.

PVC makers point to their recycled content and recyclability, as well as processes that cut manufacturing waste and durability that creates long life of their products, minimizing replacement needs. Gossen, for instance, stresses that LEED reversed its negative credit for using vinyl in 2007 because of its life-cycle factors and that the company reclaims 99% of its waste and uses 100% recyclable vinyl. Its materials also require 50% less petroleum than other common plastics and consume less energy to produce, it says. "Sustainability provides a value-add for customers," says Raganyi. "We're proud of the work we do to be responsible."

Hidden Fasteners Dominate

As homeowners look to make their decks more an extension of their homes, they also want a clean, smooth appearance. That has caused a dramatic rise in hidden-fastener systems. "It's really amazing how

fast they've grown," says TimberTech's Brennan. "The more homeowners invest, the less interest they have in seeing fasteners. They want a better look."

Two years ago, grooved boards that accommodate hidden fasteners made up about 30% of sales for MoistureShield, estimates Gwatney. Today they account for nearly 90% of sales. "They gained momentum on the East Coast and worked their way across. Homeowners like the look and the idea that moisture won't penetrate through the fastener holes." Tools designed to quickly install the fasteners makes them popular with contractors, too. "Contractors find them easier and faster to work with."

Accessory pieces also are gaining popularity. "We're seeing more interest in our lines of exterior mouldings, fascia and soffit, drip edges, water tables and other items," says Gwatney. "It's exciting to see them doing so well."



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A key category is railings, which includes clear-plastic panels, cables and many other materials. Sales depend on regional preferences and architectural styling. "There are so many railing systems, it can be a race to the bottom in pricing," says Kleer's Delaney. Lighting products of all types also are gaining popularity, as homeowners look to extend their use of outdoor-living spaces at night, notes Mendocino's Welch. "Homeowners are adding more components of all types."

Stocking this wide range of materials, colors and accessories can create challenges, marketers note. "There are so many options, the real challenge is meeting demands without overloading the dealer with stock," notes TimberTech's Brennan.

Kleer has committed to keeping its line unchanged for the present, says Delaney. "Dealers don't want changes

or additions that wind up with them holding discontinued products," he says. Kleer also has cut the size of its packages from 96 pieces to 48 and reduced the number in its fascia-board packs to 24 to aid dealers in turning inventory faster.

With so much activity underway in an otherwise down economy, marketers are encouraged by what lies ahead. Perennial, for instance, has its eye on expanding nationally out of its current Northeast market in two years.

Mendocino sees considerable market potential in the Mountain States, which slowed their use of redwood in the 2000s when supply weakened. "We're probably doing 10% of the business in those states that we used to do, so there is great potential," Welch says. "Part of that will require the redwood industry to regain the trust of dealers that we can provide them with a continuing supply even when demand picks up in California."

Evolving technology also will spur sales, says MoistureShield's Gwatney. His company currently is working with nanotechnology, which will provide an array of new features. The first may be glow-in-the-dark edging for boards used for marinas and other commercial areas where safety is a high priority. "That will be a game-changer," he says. "Every architect and government body will specify that for insurance reasons alone." He expects to have some announcements ready by the end of this year. "Everybody's waiting for the next big thing," he says.

Adds Welch, "We're always interested in exploring new opportunities for redwood. And our biggest opportunity right now is definitely in consumer decking." ■

Craig A. Shutt, senior contributing editor of *LBM Journal*, has more than 32 years of experience covering the LBM industry.

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