

How to take care of timber decks, cladding, garden sheds, furniture etc - the proper way. By Dermot Greene

Where do I turn for proper advice?

There are scores of products on the market for protecting and beautifying timber etc, some good and some not so good. There are equally as many variations in advice offered, some good and unfortunately lots not so good.

Every day I come across the after-effects of all such products and bad advice out there in the course of my work as a wood care specialist / troubleshooter. It is remarkable how often I come across people who have been misled, badly advised, or simply picked up the first tin of something they might have seen on the T V, even if it was totally inappropriate for their particular needs. It is very hard to find dedicated store staff who make an effort to acquire a proper data bank of knowledge in whatever field they are involved in no matter what that is! From curtains, to electronic gadgets, to woodcare protection etc. When you do come across one of those 'walking treasures' don't you just feel so glad you did? Yes, they are out there but we could do with seeing more of them.

Anyway, back to timber, taking care of it and keeping it looking at it's very best for many years.

Before one can advise he / she must learn first, both the theory and the practical real-life stuff.

During the last ten years or so I've invested most of my working time learning from several of the leading wood care experts from Scandinavia, U.S.A, and elsewhere, while dealing hands-on with numerous on-site cock-ups, on all kinds of wooden structures from decks, marinas, yachts, sailing ships, cladding, hardwood garden furniture, fencing, log cabins etc, the results of poor advice and so on and so on.

Here are my findings and some practical, sound advice which, hopefully will save you and or, your friends or relatives from one of the aforementioned cock-ups and their associated cost in money terms as well as all the added frustration and stress.

My top of the pile of 'what's out there' in woodcare would have to be a bunch of wood care products from the Owatrol stable. Underdogs to some big brand names they may be, but in my opinion, they 'do the business' second to none. A division of The Flood Company, Ohio, U.S.A., one of America's leading deck / timber-care product manufacturers, Owatrol International covers a complete line of highest quality timber care products.

They are not the cheapest mind you, but to my mind they would safely qualify as the best, hard earned money can buy, and given the fact that your beautiful timber doesn't come cheap, why skimp on a few coppers for the sake of getting that job done right first time?

From my travels, I do know, that more and more quality deck installers, both in the U K & Ireland are recommending this same system I am about to tell you about here today. There is a complete family of products to suit the different situations, needs and tastes.

Here are some of the main issues to look at before deciding what to do with your exterior wood whether it's new, old, treated or untreated etc:

1. New wood - what should be done with it?
2. What do you want your wood to look like when you're done?
3. Has it been treated by you or by a previous owner before?
4. Was that wood ever treated?

1. New Wood - what should be done with it?

Lets take it step by step and start at the beginning with new wood.

FACT: The first year is the worst year for all new exposed timber!

Irrespective of whether your new deck is pressure treated or not, it is still possible that the new wood will crack, split, warp or cup. Pressure treating is designed to prevent ROT and DECAY, not splitting etc.

New deck timber frequently has mill glaze (a shiny finish caused by a combination of timber planing, wood oils, resins etc during manufacture) which prevents the proper penetration of practically any finish whatsoever. The net effect of this mill glaze etc is that the wood's pores have been slammed shut by the planer blades and may take several months before they become open again properly, or open enough to allow the wood be treated properly. The one thing that has a very high success rate of getting into this very same wood is good old rainwater! After lying for some time on the wood it will get in to the timber.

In other words, you are wasting your money & time applying any regular off-the-shelf finish like stains, cheap deck oils etc, because they probably will not penetrate properly and will peel off or wear off in no time. Some mis-informed people advise that you should leave your wood to weather with nothing on it for several months and not to apply anything. That advice is both right and wrong. It is right to some extent because virtually no treatment gets into new wood's pores - hence the thinking is, wait until the pores open fully.

That advice is wrong because, meanwhile water WILL get into the wood and will do damage such as splitting, cupping, warping etc. The Western Red Cedar Association in North America says new cedar etc should not be left unprotected for this very reason.

New Wood "The Myth":

"This wood is pressure treated and does not need to be looked after"

This kind of comment had been bandied about by some well-meaning, but seriously mis-informed timber sellers or deck installers. The fact is, pressure treatment takes care of wood rot related issues and does not deal with water and sun related problems which are the biggest 'visible' problems you will probably ever come across.

A good analogy would be the expensive paint job on a brand new car, doesn't it look great? Doesn't it need to be looked after, washed and polished from time to time to maintain it and keep it looking great? Leave it to the mercy of our weather, dirt etc and it won't stay looking good for long! The same applies to your new timber or wood (whichever you prefer to call it)... left to its own devices it will soon look like a pile of old pallets not to mention the damage done to its fibre structure!

Back to the new wood, and what to do with it.

Irrespective of whether it is pressure treated or not (pressure treated wood usually can be identified by a greenish tint) the new wood should be protected against damage and algae etc if you want it to last, look well, be most importantly –safe, in the case of decking.

Owatrol do a product specifically designed to treat new wood, called SEASONITE.

SEASONITE, a deep penetrating treatment, should be applied as soon as possible after installing your deck, cladding, wooden garden furniture, shed or any other new outdoor timber structure. It is wetter than water, and gets into those tightly closed pores where very little else but water will get in.

Seasonite's job is to allow the new wood 'weather' in a controlled fashion, i.e. it allows excess moisture escape GRADUALLY from the new wood over the course of six months or more, while at the same time preventing NEW moisture or water from getting into the wood.

Splitting and cracking etc, generally takes place during changes in weather conditions, from sun to rain to sun etc, which causes the damp wood to suddenly expand and then crack and so on.

Did you ever 'hear your deck creak' after a shower of rain followed by a bit of sun?

Why does it do that? 'The wood absorbs the water so causing it to expand and as soon as the rain stops and the sun comes out the wood starts to dry causing it to contract (shrink). It is this constant expanding and contracting that the wood experiences due to wet and dry cycles that causes it to split, warp, crack etc so damaging it. Seasonite controls this movement of moisture in and out of the wood, thereby controlling the wood's movement and dramatically reducing the wood's potential to split etc, so keeping the wood looking new longer.

Plain common sense! It's a shame to see lovely planks of expensive wood with ugly big splits and cracks all over it.

SEASONITE is not a product designed to make a big impression on your visual senses, it's main job is just to protect your wood in it's first, and most vulnerable year, leaving it properly prepared for the next phase of protection where shade, colour etc comes in. Another huge benefit of Seasonite is that it contains a fungicide which helps prevent the growth of algae etc. (That's what causes decks to become slippery & possibly dangerous when wet).

2. What do you want your wood to look like when you're done?

(2a) That Silvery Greyed Look?

Depending on how you want your timber to look eventually, i.e. a continuation of that lovely just-installed look, or what some people like, that silvery greyed look which is the way Cedar decking, cladding etc ends up if left untreated. If you want a silvery, weathered look, all you need to do is apply one coat of Seasonite every year or two. This is a very simple job and can be done in no time at all with a simple, pump type garden sprayer or even a roller or sweeping brush etc. However, even though the Seasonite will continue to offer protection it will not stop the timber from getting a deeper silver colour to the point where it will end up looking unsightly and needing a proper clean. (See further down re cleaning etc)

It is not a dirty job and anybody with the slightest DIY ability can do it easily. The Seasonite will prevent 'new' water / moisture from getting in, and keeps the wood inside in good condition, while at the same time the outside weathers and takes on that weathered silvery look. So you get the look you want but without letting your timber go to rack and ruin.

(2 b) The Natural New Wood Look or different shades? (Most popular)

If your preference is for that beautiful, natural, recently sawn-wood look I would suggest the following course of action. After seasoning has taken place, ideally having been treated with Seasonite when installed, & several months (6+) of controlled weathering has taken place, your deck is now ready for the next phase of treatment.

Clean & restore the original colour.

Even if you used Seasonite as mentioned above, when the wood was new, it will fade and turn grey as well as catch some dirt, bird droppings, water stains etc. So before you do anything, the deck, or whatever it is, must be cleaned, and the original natural colour of the wood completely restored with Net-Trol, a revolutionary and environmentally safe product.

Here's how.

All you've got to do is wet the wood thoroughly, apply a mixture of one part Net-Trol to about three parts water (the less water the stronger the mix) and

apply with anything like a clean sweeping brush, or whatever is handy. After about 10 minutes, it is a good idea to slightly agitate the applied cleaner with something like a stiff bristled nylon brush just to help 'work it in' to the pores etc. After about 30 minutes, rinse off thoroughly with clean water. If you're doing this job on a dry sunny day, and the Net-Trol cleaning treatment is drying out prematurely, just moisten the area with a fine mist from a garden hose to keep it wet, because the cleaning action stops working if it dries out. If the wood has been really dirty or very badly faded, you may need to repeat the above exercise. (Alternatively, see info on the very powerful PrepDeck below) You will also see a vast difference in the look of the wood and the original colour will come right back. When the cleaned wood dries out it will brighten to some degree but it will look very much like it did when new.

Now, to beautify and protect your wood...Oil it.

I recommend that you wait for at least three days with good drying conditions after the above cleaning has been done before attempting to apply any protective coat. Ideally, 3 to 4 good drying days should allow your wood to be fully dried out again making it receptive for further treatment.

This easy job is done using a very easy-to-use product called TEXTROL and anybody reasonably competent with his or her hands can do it. (Take all the usual precautions like wearing rubber gloves etc)

Textrol is an anti-UV, deep-penetrating clear oil, which goes into the wood rather than on it, leaving a nice matte finish.

There are two ready-tinted versions of Textrol called Redwood and Cedar tones available in UK.

For the more adventurous, the Textrol clear can be tinted (by the paint store) in a nice selection of semi-transparent colours from cool blues to warm browns using the Textrol as either a yellow or clear base.

How to apply: The very first application (only) should be two coats, one soon after the other. Do your project in manageable sections, i.e. you must go back and apply your second coat before the first coat becomes touch dry.

Depending on the porosity of the wood, your first coat should be absorbed in about half an hour or less. If you wait too long and the first coat 'sets up', your second coat will have difficulty getting in, which in turn means that the wood will not have had enough to 'drink'. The knock-on effect of this is that the protection will only last half as long as it should. If you are working on a deck and some 'ponding' occurs from excess Textrol, just wipe it off with a clean cloth to prevent 'skinning'. (See TIP re doing Decks)

Textrol also contains a fungicide which keeps algae etc at bay, and most importantly, in the case of a deck, helps keep it from becoming slippery when wet. Textrol will not peel or lift and can be recoated without sanding which is a great advantage.

Cedar looks beautiful with the Textrol clear, it enhances the grain and has a lovely natural look. It would be best described as looking like clean, new, wet cedar.

Another point to consider is that the two tinted versions will last longer than the clear because they have more pigment in them and they resist the UV rays better.

Textrol (clear) by the way, can last, when properly applied, from 1.5 to 3 years depending on its position relative to the sun. The less exposed to direct sunlight, the longer it lasts and visa versa.

Textrol is a breathable finish that protects the timber from excess moisture ingress and ideally should be recoated with just one coat without sanding every twelve to eighteen months, depending on sun exposure. As with Seasonite, Textrol is very easy to apply, if you have a pump sprayer, use that, or you could use a clean sweeping brush, paintbrush or roller. One point to remember is, as soon as your wood starts to get grey looking, it's telling you it needs some more oiling with Textrol.

3. Has it been treated by you or by a previous owner before?

You need to find out what you are dealing with before you can effectively restore or treat it. Perhaps your deck or exterior wood has been treated before by you or a contractor and you cannot remember with what, perhaps the wood was messed up by the application of inappropriate coatings, or they were applied in the wrong way? Or maybe you've recently moved into this house and the exterior woodwork needs doing, but you don't have a clue what to do to restore it? Important that you deal with this.

Start at the beginning and do a simple test on various parts of the wood. Wait until the wood is dry; apply a few drops of water here and there (gently). If the water droplet soaks into the wood after about 5 to 10 minutes, (might be a little longer in hardwoods) that tells you that your wood is porous and that it can be treated after a relatively easy cleaning with Net-Trol. (See Clean & Restore above) On the other hand if the water droplet stays there and does not soak in, but rather sits there on the wood, it tells you that there is something there like a previous coating (which may or may not be clearly visible) of some sort, and it must be removed properly before doing anything else.

This can be achieved with a very powerful stripper cleaner like the PrepDeck. This product can be used diluted with water at a ratio of 1 part PrepDeck and 10 parts water for wood that is not excessively dirty looking, or you could go all the way up to neat Prepdeck for disaster situations, such as heavily coated with old stains, coatings etc. It may be useful to do a few tests using different mix ratios to get a feel for what might work best for your situation.

Work from weak towards strong. Apply PrepDeck on to dry wood.

Next, a few words of caution re PrepDeck:

- Shake very well before use.
- Wear protective gloves, eye protection etc and cover anything you don't want

- splashed or interfered with including shrubs etc.
- Decks can be very slippery while being treated with PrepDeck so take extreme care.
- Do not let the PrepDeck dry out while it is working, keep moist.
- On vertical surfaces, it is better to work from the bottom up to minimise streaking etc.

PrepDeck, because it is so powerful can, and will darken some woods during the course of the cleaning action. Don't worry though, you can restore the natural colour of the darkened wood again by treating it with Net-Trol diluted about 4 parts water to 1 part Net-Trol. In any event, whether the wood darkens or not, the PrepDeck will remove the toughest of old stains, oils etc and bring the wood back to its original look.

All wood cleaned with PrepDeck must be neutralised immediately afterwards while still wet with Net-Trol, diluted about 3 or 4 to one before a final thorough rinsing off with clean water. You could use a garden hose or even a power washer at about 500psi (low pressure) and make sure, if you are using a power washer, that you run with the wood grain, not against it which might raise the wood fibres and or even cause splintering.

Working time for PrepDeck would be around 20 to 30 minutes for stubborn stains, oils etc, and for less challenging cleaning jobs it can be diluted by as much as 20 to 1 and take about 10 to 15 minutes to work.

NOTE: In all cases, after you use PrepDeck, the wood must be neutralised with diluted Net-Trol immediately afterwards while the wood is still wet. Do not, under any circumstances, apply Textrol on to any wood that has been cleaned with PrepDeck unless the wood has been neutralised with diluted Net-Trol (see above) prior to drying off.

Now, keep that newly cleaned and restored wood looking great!

Wait for at least three or four good drying days or even a little longer, for your wood to dry out completely and then you can treat it with any of your TEXTROL options as mentioned in 2 b above.

5. Was the wood ever treated?

If you know that your wood has never treated by you or anybody else, even if it was pressure treated, it can easily be brought back to life and look great again.

If it is not too severely stained or dirty you will get a very good result using Net-Trol (See Clean & restore the original colour above).

If the wood is heavily stained, has all sorts of grime and dirt on it; you may need the more powerful PrepDeck to get the stubborn stuff off. See 3 above (Followed by Net-Trol - see 3 above)

My advice is try the Net-Trol first (as per above instructions) even if you have to use it almost neat. Do a few simple tests using different strengths of Net-Trol diluted with water. Obviously the less Net-Trol you get away with using, the better it is for you!

You may need to do it twice, but that will be determined by your tests.

NOTE: You will not see the real result of your test until the wood has dried out to a reasonable extent, so just go off and do something else meanwhile.

When you are happy that you have got your wood as clean as possible, wait until it has fully dried out and then you can apply the two coats of TEXTROL as per 2 above.

DECK TIPS

On a new deck, it is advisable to put planter boxes, etc into waterproof trays and if possible, raised off the surface of the deck. Move them around from time to time. This will prevent "rings" from forming, and allow the deck to breathe uniformly.

Deck furniture such as chairs, umbrella base etc should have rubber or plastic cups fitted where possible.

Bar B Que's should have some form of protection on the deck floor to prevent serious burn marks or bad stains. Try a small sheet of aluminium or steel, about one meter square, (available from a good DIY store or Builders merchant) which can be removed after cooking. This can possibly be stored away underneath the deck.

If you have rusting nail heads, hanging flower brackets etc leaving rust stains on your wood, they can be cleaned off with the Net-Trol product mentioned above. When dried out, apply some Owatrol Oil directly to the rusted nail or screw heads etc to seal them up and prevent the rust reforming again for many years.

When oiling a deck with TEXTROL, work from the furthest point backwards to avoid having to walk over an area you've just done. Ideally, Textrol the wood by treating about 6 planks, at a time from one end to the other. This means, by the time you you've done the six planks once, apply a second coat following the same 'route' again.