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Hit the Deck

By Chris Lavin



Jack Champlin of Lafayette repaired his deck so that his family would have a dining area while the kitchen was being renovated.

Photo Chris Lavin

using a nifty tool that she had ordered from Sunset magazine - a deck flosser. So Houghton tracked down the tool and bought a couple of them. Over the years, they didn't hold up so well, but the inventor didn't want anything to do with them. So he just told Houghton: "You can have it. You make 'em."

So with his usual enthusiasm Houghton got to work. He set up a workshop in his garage (with a retinal scanner to get in and security cameras galore), improved on the design, applied for a patent, and now he's in distribution mode. (He turned out to be fibbing about the retinal scanner and cameras.) "I love this thing," Houghton said, picking it up and turning it in his hand like a fine gem. "It works great."

Bill Snider at Moraga Hardware and Lumber is the first one to carry prototypes, although they haven't decided how much to price them for. "That's my wife's job," Houghton said. "She owns the company."

For more than 40 years Houghton has helped people fix, build and maintain their decks. It's really not that tough, he said. His checklist:

Make sure the debris is out between the grooves.

Sand them down when they get rough. Water can collect in the cracks, freeze, or start to do its rotting thing.

Pound the nails flush with the surface first.

Richard Houghton is a tall man with a big smile and an unusual passion.

"I could talk decks all day," Houghton said with surprising enthusiasm for the subject. "And all night. You'll have to shut me up."

Houghton has sanded, repaired or otherwise built from scratch more than 3,000 decks in the area, probably 2,000 of them in Lamorinda.

"Now is the time, before we get too much rain," he said. "You've got to get the debris out from between the grooves or you're going to hold the moisture in there, and it's going to rot a lot sooner than it otherwise would."

And that takes time, and regularity. Decks can be such a pain sometimes that not everyone is a fan.

"I hate decks," said Gloria Lenhart of Lafayette. "I did have decks and hated them, but I don't have one now. Here's the problem with decks: They are maintenance nightmares which require regular sanding, sealing and repairing. I once lived in a house with three decks and every year we sanded down and re-sealed one of them. A never-ending task. In this house I have a concrete patio. All you have to do is sweep it off occasionally, and really you don't even have to do that!"

Houghton understands this sentiment and sees it in his customers. So he came up with a solution: On one of his jobs he found a woman

Sweep or blow the decks if wet material has fallen.

Seal, seal, seal with a good sealant.

Inspect above and below for rot and weak spots.

And sometimes, he admits, you just have to replace them.

Houghton said homeowners can typically expect to spend between \$25 and \$35 per square foot for full all-out replacement or deck additions. Unfortunately, he said, California this year passed a 1 percent surcharge on cut lumber, and even if the owner decided to go with composite materials for the decking itself, the understory still has to be constructed with wood, adding to the final cost.

Houghton didn't use to like the composite materials, called Trex. The first generations of the material were simply made of shredded plastic bottles, made into pellets, and melted together. "But they found that water could get into the spaces between the pellets and when it froze, the stuff fell apart," he said.

Not good. Now the company is on its sixth generation. "It does last longer than redwood," he said, "but most people really love the warm look of redwood."

Houghton runs Fine Line Renovations at decksbyfineline.com.



Richard Houghton demonstrates his nifty Groove Cleaner that he builds himself in his garage.



Houghton inspects the under-story of a deck for dry rot. Photos Chris Lavin

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[back](#)

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