

Columnists

Originally published Friday, July 13, 2012 at 7:44 PM

Enjoy your deck with a green touch

The ways we build and use our backyard decks have an impact on the environment and our health all year long.

By Tom Watson

Special to The Seattle Times

For much of the year, a backyard deck in Western Washington sits lonely, wet and largely unused, gathering moss and leaves.

Then, during the sparkling, sunny days of the short Seattle summer, a deck gets transformed into a nexus of eating, entertaining and lounging. But the ways we build and use decks have an impact on the environment and our health all year long.

Q: In the grand scheme of things, how important is it to "green" my deck?

A: Safety is the first priority. Just for starters, you need to make sure people won't fall off, that the deck won't collapse under a lot of weight, and that your grill isn't a hazard.

Green measures may help contribute to the safety of the deck. You could choose a sustainable decking material that is slip-resistant, for example.

Green choices on the deck can also reduce waste, conserve resources, reduce exposure to hazardous substances and save money.

Q: People love outdoor grilling, but what are some of the safety and environmental issues?

A: You might hold one unexpected risk right in your hand. In several incidents around the nation, including one in King County in May, metal bristles have come off grill brushes and ended up in grilled food. People ingested the tiny pieces of wire, which perforated their stomach or intestines and sent them to the hospital.

As an alternative, try a grill-cleaning block or stone. Available at hardware and home-improvement stores or online, these cost under \$6, and some are made from recycled glass.

Undercooked meat also poses a health risk when grilling outdoors, so consider using a meat thermometer. And partly because beef production has such an enormous environmental impact, why not offer more veggies at your next cookout? Grilled vegetables on skewers are usually a big hit with kids.

Q: Can you recommend a portable, eco-friendly grill for a small deck?

A: A Cobb grill (cobbq.com) is fuel-efficient because it uses only about eight pieces of charcoal. The bottom of the grill stays cool, making it safer. This compact grill is ideal for a tiny deck, apartment balcony or for camping.

Q: How about other ways to go green while entertaining on the deck?

A: Avoid cheap plastic deck furniture that breaks or looks shabby after one season. Consider more durable outdoor furniture, including used items.

Sturdy deck chairs and tables are now available made from recycled plastic or reclaimed wood, but they can be expensive.

Instead of using throwaway plastic utensils, buy a bunch of used forks and knives at a thrift store for a few bucks and make that your set for outdoor entertaining. Place them on the deck in reused, painted tin cans.

Q: We need to replace our deck this year. What are our choices?

A: According to Consumer Reports (seati.ms/PRJKio), wood is often the least expensive option for decking but requires more maintenance such as staining.

The cheapest wood decking has typically been pressure-treated with pesticides and preservatives, although these chemicals are now considered less toxic than previous versions.

Sustainably-harvested hardwood decking such as tigerwood offers greater durability, but costs more.

Composite decking, made of recycled and reclaimed plastic and wood such as plastic bags and sawdust, has become increasingly popular. Several types require little maintenance and are reasonably priced.

However, some consumers have complained about their composite decking deteriorating or becoming discolored after a few years, so make sure to research products and review warranties carefully.

Be realistic, and if you know you won't do annual staining or other rigorous upkeep, spend more for low-maintenance decking. When you do treat your wooden deck, look for less-toxic staining or sealing products containing lower VOCs (volatile organic compounds).

In Seattle, we need to take advantage of deck weather when we can, so let's hope you're reading this in bright sunshine on your glorious, green deck.

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