

Synthetic Decking: Best Buy or Absolute Nightmare?

August 18th, 2009 in [Blogs](#)

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Rob Yagid, associate editor

Synthetic decking has more than grown in popularity over the years. Its use has simply exploded. Back in 2005 former editor Chris Green reported that there was a 198% increase in synthetic decking sales from 2000 to 2004 in an article entitled [Synthetic Decking Takes Off](#). Well, it certainly did and it has landed on thousands of decks across the country. But, I have to wonder, was that a good thing?

Best-case scenario

I understand all of the claims that support the performance of synthetic decking. Synthetic deck boards have a uniform appearance, which can match almost any popular wood decking material. And there's no culling through stacks to find matching boards. Ideally they last for ever with no color fade. Synthetic deck boards shouldn't be prone to mold and rot. They're durable and low maintenance. Still, I can't fully bring myself to choose synthetic deck material over a natural wood product. More so, I'm not convinced that overall it out performs wood. Here's why:

Wood is not the enemy.

Now, I realize that all synthetic decking is not the same. You've got polyethylene based composite, polypropylene based composites, wood free plastics, fly-ash based products and a host of other options all trying to compete with the real thing. Why, then, would you not opt for real wood and get proven performance for the next 40 years or so instead of taking a risk? I've heard horror stories of synthetic decking rapidly fading in color, scratching, warping, degrading and separating at the joints, rotting and growing mold at an astonishing rate. Sure, it may make you feel all warm and fuzzy inside to know that a shred of your old milk jug may one day end up in a deck, but is all of the technology and energy used to make these imitations making true ecological progress? Is it all worth it? The claims sounds great, I agree, but personally I'm afraid the positive spin is really all it has to offer. (Please, post and inform me otherwise if you can. I'm really interested in the embodied energy of this product.)

Costs are high.

Where I live I can get Ipe, Cedar and PT decking for the same price as the best synthetics (often it's actually less), so I have a hard time finding the cost savings. I know, I know, the argument is that I'll save time and expenses in maintenance with synthetics. However, I wouldn't know where to start in the repair of a synthetic product and fear that in some cases I'd be forced to replace it. There goes any conceivable cost savings.

The look.

I don't like the look of stamped plastic in or around homes. I don't care if you can, "hardly" tell from 20 feet away. Fake, in my book, is fake and I appreciate authenticity. So do I find synthetic decking to be an absolute nightmare? No, I don't, but I sure would consider it a restless night. I've left myself open to criticism, and hope that I can become better informed by your feedback. Has anyone been equally unimpressed with synthetic products? Conversely, has anyone had an exceptional experience working with synthetic decking? Please weigh in.



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