

## Deck Strippers / Cleaners

There is not a universally accepted distinction between these two terms. Some people use them interchangeably, sometimes one is considered a subcategory of the other and some people see a clear distinction between them. Entering into the stripper/cleaner debate is not necessary. First you must look at your deck and assess its condition and then determine a plan of action.

Make sure that the deck is sound. Check the supports as well as the stairs, handrails, and the deck itself. Cleaning and refinishing will not fix rotten boards. They will need to be replaced. If most of the deck is rotten tear it down and start over. There are now building material that will never rot.

What type of wood was used in making your deck and what connectors were used? You need to answer these questions. Decks built before 2004 were usually built with chromate copper arsenate (CCA) treated lumber. There is now concerns about its toxicity so personal protection equipment (gloves, goggles, dust mask) needs to be used when working on these decks and good coatings need to be used to seal in the CCA.

No matter the brand of name of strippers/cleaners there are chemical similarities. There are three main categories; chlorine leaches, oxygen bleaches and oxalic acid-based formulas. All categories have their advantages and disadvantages. In order to pick the right one(s) you must determine the condition of your deck.

Chlorine bleaches: Includes sodium hypo chlorite, calcium hypo chlorite and dichloroisocyanurate. The first two are common laundry detergents and the last a pool additive. These products are great at eradicating mold and mildew but they are not able to remove dirt and grease alone. They damage wood by dissolving the lignin which holds the wood together. They are also harmful to plants and pets and can react with sunlight to further damage the wood.

Oxygen bleaches: These come in powder form because they are only good for a short time. These cleaners are usually disodium peroxydicarbonate, which is commonly called sodium per carbonate. When mixed with water it forms hydrogen peroxide & sodium carbonate (soda ash). These bleaches are not very stable and must be used within six hours of mixing but they are biodegradable. They remove mildew, dirt and weathered gray residues. They return most types of wood to an original appearance, including cedar. The only drawback is that they should not be used on new wood.

Oxalic acid (or ethanedioic acid): It is often called 'wood bleach' or 'teak bleach' but it is a strong acid. It is not harmful to plants but concentrated it is toxic to people and animals. This is the most common cleaner in the U.S. Oxalic acid reinvigorates cedar and redwood. If you have iron stains or leaf stains they can be easily removed. The drawback is that that it doesn't remove mold and mildew. Oxalic acid comes in concentrated liquid solutions or granulated or powder mixes.