

Removing Grade Stamps

Q What's the easiest way to remove grade stamps and other markings from PT lumber? My clients haven't decided yet on whether they want a clear or semi-transparent stain, but they don't want letters and numbers showing through the stain. Is there a cleaner or a special technique for removing these tenacious markings?

A John Paulin, of Tailor Decks, in Statham, Ga., responds: While the water-based ink that's used for marking pressure-treated lumber should eventually disappear with exposure to weather and foot traffic, I have never had a customer who liked the look of grade stamps and pencil marks all over his or her new deck. I've tried to remove them prior to staining by power-washing, and I've tried scrubbing them away with detergent and a scouring pad, too, but with limited success. I've also tried sanding boards after installation with a 3-inch by 24-inch belt sander and 80-grit paper. Sanding can work, but sometimes the ink penetrates the wood fairly deeply and is difficult to remove, and sometimes PT decking is so wet that it clogs up the paper. In addition, you have to be careful not to sand the heads of the nails or screws in the installed decking. Sanding belts are expensive, too.

Now I run all of my deck boards through a power planer prior to installation, skimming off the least amount possible. If a planer isn't available, or if the decking is crowned, a hand planer can be used, though you might need to clean up the boards a bit afterward with a belt sander to remove the planer marks. While this process sounds tedious, it's actually not too bad once you get set up. As long as you clear this step with your building inspector, taking a little extra time to remove the marks prior to installation saves a lot of time later on, and significantly improves the appearance of PT decking.



JOHN PAULIN

Not all treated southern yellow pine has clear vertical grain like this, of course, but your PT decking will look better if you run it lightly through a power planer to remove grade marks prior to installation.

Pouring Concrete in Dry Soil

Q As a deck builder, I often have to dig and pour concrete footings. But after long spells of dry weather, the soil at the bottom of the excavated holes can be super dry. How does the moisture content in the soil affect how bagged concrete cures?

A Bill Palmer Jr., an engineer and the editor-in-chief of *Concrete Construction*, a sister publication of *PDB*, responds: Concrete gains strength through a reaction called hydration, which means that water is consumed as it reacts with the mix and forms the crystalline structure that makes the concrete strong. If the concrete dries out before the

hydration reaction is complete, it will not reach its full strength. This holds true for curing both at the top surface and at the bottom surface of the pour.

If concrete is poured into a hole with dry soil, the soil can pull the water out of the mix, and for some distance into the concrete (depending on how dry the soil is), the concrete will be weaker than intended. To prevent weakening the concrete, dampen any dry soil that will be in contact with the concrete. Dampening the soil can also help to reduce shrinkage cracks caused by water being drawn out of the mix.

Be aware that the type of soil can have a bearing on how much dampening you

should do. For example, clay soil doesn't absorb much water, so it doesn't take much water to dampen it. Never pour concrete into a hole if there is standing water in it. Excess water increases the water-to-cement ratio in the concrete mix, which reduces the strength of the concrete. Other important factors to consider with soil types are how much the soil will compact and settle with loads placed on top, and whether the soil will expand as it absorbs moisture, as with some clays. If you have doubts about the bearing capacity of your soils, be sure to check with an engineer.

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