if you keep the framing at least 8 in. above grade, there is no code requirement to use rot-resistant lumber. I built such a shed at my house 20 years ago, and it's still going strong today.

Demoing spray foam

I'm about to start remodeling a project whose walls are insulated with spray foam. I've found the stuff is surprisingly hard to tear out. Any tips?

—HOWARD
via email

Andy Engel replies: Demoing spray foam has challenges. You can't just pull it out like batt insulation, and it's hard to determine what else is buried in the foam. Wires? Pipes? Jimmy Hoffa? Maybe, but where? A digital wall scanner is a great tool for locating these things. If you don't have one, you can look for clues such as outlets and switches. Get down in the basement or crawlspace and up in the attic and see if you can figure out the paths the mechanicals take.

Even when you've found the origins of mechanicals, you can't be sure what turns they take behind the foam. In the past, I've carefully probed the foam with an insulation knife to find pipes and wires, but I recently found a much faster method. I simply run a reciprocating saw through the foam, cutting with the nontoothed side of the blade. This goes through foam like a hot, noisy knife through butter, with little chance of damaging wires or pipes.

To actually demo the structure, the easiest thing is to cut the whole assembly into manageable chunks and haul them off to the dumpster. As much fun as wholesale destruction is, a lot of projects involve just a couple of stud bays in order to add a window or a door. In that case, I excavate the spray foam piecemeal.

Open-cell foam is relatively easy—you can literally thrust your fingers into the stuff and claw out handfuls. It's easier, though, to separate the foam from the framing members using the reciprocating-saw trick above, then pry out big chunks with a flat bar. Closed-cell foam is far more difficult, but the technique is the same.

Whether open-cell or closed-cell, I don't just empty trash cans of foam debris into the dumpster. I bag it up first to keep the wind from distributing it throughout the neighborhood. Also, it's a good idea to wear a dust mask when tearing out foam, particularly the lighter open-cell variety. Trust me when I tell you that sucking a flake of foam into your lungs won't be the best part of your day.

Refinishing a deck

My project this spring will be refinishing our ipe deck. It's been a few years, and I want to be sure to do it right. Can you help me out with the process?

—DIEGO
via email

Brooke Cambridge, owner of BLC Painting in Boston, replies: The first move when refinishing your deck is to assess your decking. Harder woods such as ipe are treated differently than soft ones such as cedar. What's its condition? I choose from one of three categories: The stain or finish is failing or peeling, the stain or finish is looking dull and faded, or the wood is unstained but has darkened and dulled over time.

If your deck's coating is peeling or flaking, you need to remove the old coating before applying a new stain. Begin by sweeping off any debris and dirt and then thoroughly rinse it with a hose or power washer (for softwoods, stick with a hose). Completely soak the decking to prep it for stripping.

It is important to not let any of the decking dry before applying a stripper, so re-wet it as needed. It is best to do this when the deck is not in direct sunlight; a cloudy day works very well.

Using a pump sprayer, mix stripper (I like Benjamin Moore's Remove) with water according to the manufacturer's instructions. Then, as evenly as possible, coat the wet decking with the stripper. Leave the stripper on the wood for as long as recommended, which is typically 15 to 30 minutes.

Then, using a pressure washer, remove the stripper. For best results and to not damage the decking, keep the nozzle moving and sweep the spray pattern along the grain of the wood. Repeat the stripper application and pressure washing until the old stain or paint is completely removed. Once stripped, allow wood to fully dry before proceeding with any sanding or staining.

If your decking just looks faded and dull, or has never been finished, you can use a wood brightener like Benjamin Moore's Restore instead of stripping. Follow the same steps when applying the wood brightener as when applying a stripper—beginning with cleaning and wetting.

Once the decking is dry, you can sand to achieve an even higher-end finish. Start with a fine-grit paper. Be gentle and don't use paper coarser than 80-grit or you may damage the finish and the wood. I like to sand to 180- to 220-grit. If using a random-orbit sander instead of hand-sanding, attach a vacuum to control dust.

Before applying any stain, be sure that your decking is below 18% moisture content. It should feel completely dry, and it's best to test by with a moisture meter. For a stain and finish, I recommend Armstrong-Clarke's one-coat system.

Maintaining a beautiful wooden deck requires regular care. If you properly prepare and condition the decking before applying a stain, it should not need to be stained again for several years, depending on weather and wear and tear.



Keep it wet. *Before stripping old finishes or using brighteners on unfinished deck boards, thoroughly clean and wet the surface to enable the stripper or brightener to work more effectively.*

Photo: Patrick McCombe