BUILDING AN Outdoor Shower

Lag-screwed frame-and-panel construction and overhead bracing make for a solid, good-looking enclosure

by Dave Holbrook

Where I live, outdoor showers are a common after-beach amenity. Real estate agents highlight them in property listings. Plumbers routinely include an exterior rough-in in their bids. And local builders have devised a slew of methods to enclose an outdoor shower, from plain-but-economical stockade fence sections butted against the house siding, to more elaborate, custom structures.

I built many enclosures in my day, often replacing the sagging remains of one assembled from standard, 6-foot-high stockade fence sections. These sections are typically crudely assembled and tend to be wobbly when used in an enclosure, especially when called upon to support a swinging door. Such doors rarely close, or open, without a struggle. And the posts usually rot through after a few seasons in the ground, probably hastened along by the extra watering.

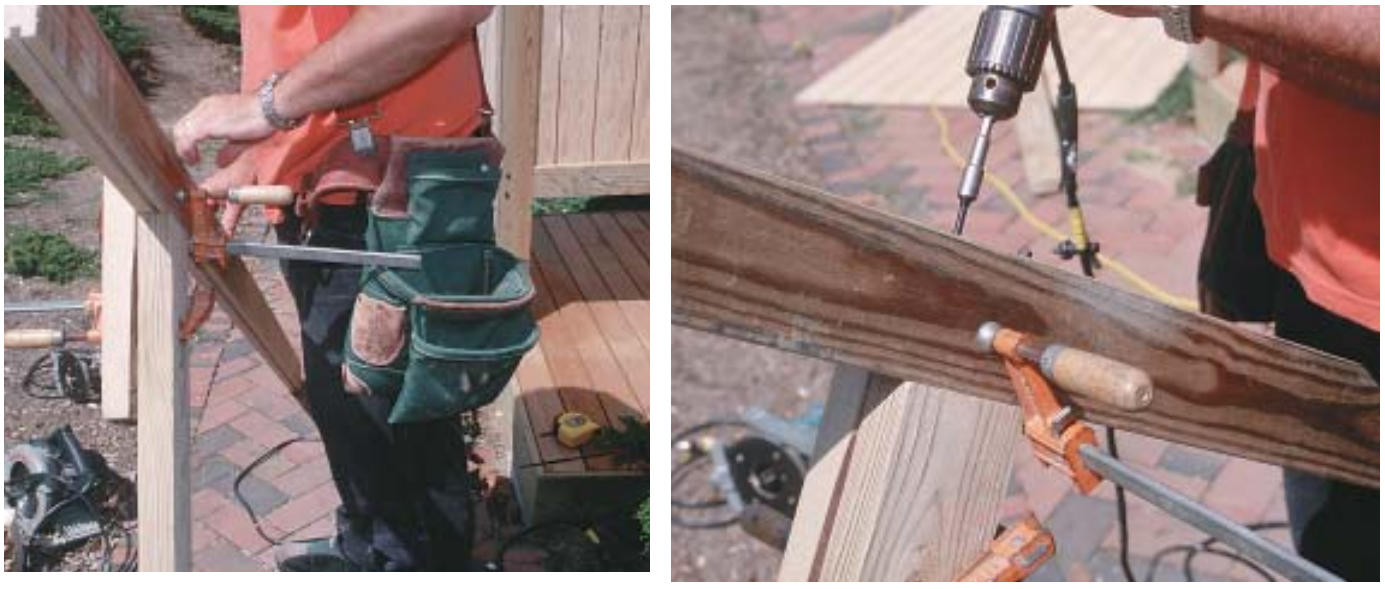

Figure 1. The author's frame-and-panel method simplifies enclosure assembly. Edge-dadoed frame members are butt-joined on the flat, held in alignment with cauls and clamps (left), and lag-bolted together (right).

The design I like has evolved over the years. I use pressure-treated 2x4s to outline the structure, and western red cedar 1-bys for the walls. Instead of nailing or screwing the boards to the 2x4s, I float them in a groove dadoed in the edge of the framing, frame-and-panel style. To eliminate "peepholes" between boards, I cut a shiplap on the edges.

To assemble the individual panel frames, I use 6-inch, hex-head Timber-Lok fasteners (Olympic Manufacturing Group, 800/633-3800, www.fastenmaster.com). Although TimberLoks generally don't require predrilling, a pilot hole keeps the screws from going astray in narrow stock. I clamp the 2x4 frame components between temporary cauls for alignment and use a 12-inch-long, 3/16-inch-diameter electrician's twist bit to make the pilot holes (see Figure 1).

Figure 2. The exterior T1-11 plywood siding has one "good" face, left to weather on the public side. The rough backing veneer within the enclosure is painted with gloss-finish latex trim paint.

The latest, dollar-driven evolution of my design was to use T1-11 channel siding instead of the costlier 1-by cedar boards. Each sheet yields two solid, 4x4-foot panels. Four feet may seem too short to screen a body, but there's no compelling reason to start the enclosure sides at grade, or to make the panels more than 5 1/2 to 6 feet tall. I start the panels about 16 inches off the ground, which provides users with a full torso block.

The backside of T1-11 is nothing special, but it readily accepts paint, providing an opportunity to introduce some color inside the enclosure with a couple of coats of glossy trim paint or exterior stain (Figure 2). I let the "outside" surface weather naturally.

For an outdoor shower, I wouldn't build anything smaller than 4 feet square. Underfoot, a free-draining wood platform, typically 1x4 mahogany or quarter-sawn fir deck boards, provides a clean, elevated base.

I build the platform frame with a 2x8 pressure-treated perimeter, mitered at the corners. A 3/4-inch-square rabbet in the upper edge of the rim joists creates

Figure 3. A raised wood platform prevents muddy feet. A rabbetted and mitered rim joist and recessed framing make a built-in border around the decking edge. Stainless-steel decking screws eliminate potentially painful nail pops.

an integral border for the decking, which is installed on recessed, 2x6 intermediate joists (Figure 3). I use stainless-steel screws to fasten the decking — nails tend to back out, or pop, under repeated wetting and drying cycles.

To support the frame, I bury a double stack of dry-laid concrete block under each corner. I set the blocks with a torpedo level and true the piers to each other. It takes a little scraping, filling, and compacting to get all the piers aligned, but it's still a quick process. I make sure to pitch the surrounding grade to drain away from the adjacent house foundation.

Overhead Frame

Building the enclosure directly against a wall of the house, preferably right outside a kitchen or bathroom for plumbing economy, provides good, rack-proof panel support. But it's the front of the enclosure, where the door goes, that can be tricky to brace properly. I tie everything together overhead with an open-framed, pergola roof (Figure 4). The pergola is both decorative and structural, as it braces the door gap and provides side-to-side stability between panels. It can also support an overhead, "rain" spray head and a

Figure 4. Overhead framing braces panels and maintains a fixed door opening (left). A decorative pergola can support semiconcealed piping and a rain-shower head (below).

Figure 5. In this shower, the original exposed plumbing, with separate hot and cold stops, was inexpensive, but it was also prone to damage and presented a scald hazard.

Figure 6. The author replaced the original plumbing with frost-protected lines from the basement and a flush-mounted Symmons pressure-balancing valve. The valve body must be drained to protect it during the winter season, a task made simpler by tying in a hand-held spray.

well-watered creeping vine, like clematis or wisteria, all enhancements to the outdoor shower experience. I screw a simple cedar lattice to the outside end panel to give the vine a leg up.

The vertical 2x4 panel "stiles" run long, about 7 feet overall, above and below the panel sections. Panel corners could be butted together, but I miter them for better appearance. A 2x4 frame overhead, mitered at the corners and assembled on the flat, ties the tops together. I use self-drilling Fastap screws (Faspac, 800/847-4714, www.fastapscrews.com) to tie most components together. This overhead frame supports the pergola members, made from treated 2-bys installed on edge at regular intervals and screwed from below. Ogee-profiled ends are cut with a saber saw, requiring little extra effort and adding style.

Plumbing

It's important to provide dedicated shutoffs, or stops, as well as a means to drain the lines between stop and shower, for winter shutdown. I run the supply lines out through the rim joist from the basement, and install stop-and-waste valves inside to drain standing water out of the lines. Outdoor shower plumbing is commonly installed on the surface of the wall, with exposed tubing and individual hot and cold valves. It's a fast, economical method, and split pipes are easier to repair after an accidental freeze-up. But it isn't fancy, or particularly safe. Even if you leave everything exposed, use a pressure-balancing anti-scald valve instead of single stops. For better appearance, I like to build the valve into the wall whenever possible. The Symmons valve I install (Symmons Industries, 800/796-6667, www.symmons.com) has a secondary takeoff at the bottom of the valve, so I had to provide a way to make it easily accessible for draining. My solution was to connect a hand-held shower hose with a diverter valve in the wand (Figure 6). It's a nice-looking amenity, even if it's used only to drain the valve.