

PRODUCTS

Composite-Railing Roundup

Options abound, whether you select a kit or separate components

by Theresa Coleman

Along with the growth of the synthetic-decking industry has come a spate of new railings made from similar materials in practically limitless styles and colors. Knowing the universe of choices available will help you meet your clients' needs and may even allow you to sell some upgrades to boost your bottom line.

So what are composite-railing manufacturers offering these days? Their main approach continues to be kits (**Figure 1**) — all the companies listed in this article sell them (see “Composite-Railing Manufacturers,” beginning on page 79), and most also sell packages made specifically for stairs. New styles and options are popping up, including “mix-and-match” kits that allow you to vary, say, what baluster goes with which railing, for a custom look. Installation guides have improved — some manufacturers even provide online video instruction. And one company guarantees 48-hour delivery from its warehouse.

Railing Kits

One advantage of a kit is that installing the components according to the manufacturer's instructions should result in a railing system that complies with building



Figure 1. Most manufacturers supply railing kits that include the newel, rail, balusters, and hardware needed to install either 6 feet or 8 feet of railing. Everything is there, but you may end up buying more than you need.

codes. After all, that installation is what the manufacturer submitted to obtain its code compliance report.

Another benefit is you don't have to figure out the number of rails and balusters — you know each kit contains a certain length of railing, usually 6 or 8 feet. For that length, it's pretty foolproof. And no one has to remember to order separate railing and balusters

Deck Builder Wish List

- “Less obstructive railing.” — Bill Bolton, DeckCreations, Santa Barbara, Calif.
- “Railings that are more closely matched to composite decking.” — Robert Heidenreich, The Deck Store, Apple Valley, Minn.
- “Much better installation guides, especially showing their products installed on decks that are not square and have more than one level! More pictures that are closeups of the product.” — Michele Moss, 1st Deck, Kansas City, Mo.
- “We actually want the decking manufacturer to be the rail guy also — so we are dealing with one entity.” — Ed Rader, Decks Unlimited, Medford Lakes, N.J.
- “I would like railing manufacturers to offer gate kits for their rails. Customers constantly ask me why none of them do.” — Jeff Bader, Deck Pros, Bridgewater, N.J.
- “Be more involved directly with deck contractors. Normally, you have to deal with the supplier or distributor if a problem arises.” — Clemens Jellema, Fine Decks, Calvert County, Md.
- “I'd be interested in expanded options for direct purchase, custom lengths, and custom bends available from the manufacturer through an online portal.” — Matt Breyer, Breyer Construction and Landscape, Reading, Penn.
- “Like everyone else, I'd like to see the price come down so that I could sell more of those types of products.” — Bobby Parks, Peachtree Decks and Porches, Alpharetta, Ga.

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Composite-Railing Manufacturers

Advanced Environmental Recycling Technologies

866/729-2378, aertinc.com

AERT sells components, but has also introduced a railing kit to its MoistureShield line that contains all the components needed for a 6-foot railing section. Each kit is packaged in three boxes and consists of one 4x4 post 51 inches high; one top rail and one bottom rail (both 72 inches long); and 14 38-inch balusters. The kits are available in Desert Sand and Terracotta. Circle #4



AERT

Azek Building Products

877/275-2935, azek.com

Azek acquired Composatron earlier this year and now offers customers two railing lines that match its deck and porch planks. All railing components are co-extruded with an encapsulated wood composite core and a high-grade PVC layer that will not peel, according to Azek. The pieces are pre-drilled and include options for hidden fasteners, stair connections, and hinged fasteners. Railing is available in 6-foot and 8-foot kits in white, brown-stone, gray, and clay.



AZEK BUILDING PRODUCTS

CertainTeed

800/233-8990, certainteed.com

The Panorama composite railing line includes decorative balusters and is available in White or Desert Tan. CertainTeed says the railing, which is wrapped in PVC, replicates the look of a smooth, painted wood finish. It features a PVC cap and a composite core made of CertainTeed's patented EcoTech material, a formulation of PVC and 100-percent-recycled maple-wood flour.



CERTAINTEED

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For more product information, visit ebuild, Hanley Wood's interactive product catalog, at ebuild.com

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Correct Building Products

877/332-5877, correctdeck.com

Mix-and-match CorrectDeck RapidRail kits are available in an expanded array of colors and feature the same level of antimicrobial protection as CorrectDeck CX. The new rail options also can be paired with other

CORRECT BUILDING PRODUCTS



manufacturers' metal and glass balusters. The company's composite composition is 60/40 recycled hardwood and polypropylene (also mostly recycled), and all products are PVC free. Circle #7

FIBERON



Fiberon

704/463-7120, fiberondecking.com

Fiberon has three lines of composite railings. The Horizon Mission and Provincial are PVC composites and come in white and almond. The Professional line is an HDPE composite, available in Cedar, Gray, and Brown.

GAF

973/628-3000, gaf.com

GAF's line of RailWays railing provides a range of colors — some matching its decking — and styles. Metal balusters are available, and the company claims that its UniBall Baluster Connectors work on both level and sloped rails.



GAF

MONARCH



Monarch Composite Deck and Railing Systems

800/482-5717, monarchdeck.com

Monarch offers three lines of composite railings. Its Exotics line matches its composite decking colors; the Bermuda line offers a freshly painted white look; and the Chameleon line combines an Exotics top rail with Bermuda posts and balusters.

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For more product information, visit ebuild, Hanley Wood's interactive product catalog, at ebuild.com

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TAMKO BUILDING PRODUCTS



Tamko Building Products

800/253-1401, evergrain.com

The company's EverGrain Designer Railing Systems are available in seven colors: Redwood, Charcoal, Weathered Wood, Cape Cod Grey, Golden Oak, CherryWood, and Cedar. The 6-foot kits are shipped in boxes with all the product items needed for installation.

TimberTech

800/307-7780, timbertech.com

RadianceRail is made from a composite capped with a PVC layer, giving it the sturdy and structural feeling of a wood railing with a cleaner look and no exposed hardware, according to the company. The mounting brackets can connect rails that meet their posts at 90 degrees, as well as rails cut at other angles. The company has a new tool on its Web site to match railings with decking boards. Circle #12



TIMBERTECH

TREX



Trex

800/289-8739, trex.com

New elements have been added to the Artisan Series Railing line, including top and bottom rail kits; an adjustable 2-inch to 3 1/2-inch crush block; tubular baluster spacers; and sleeves, caps, and skirts for 4x4 posts. The caps and skirts are available in both flat and pyramid styles.

Universal Forest Products

800/598-9663, ufpi.com

Walnut is a new color available in the company's Latitudes Railing and Decking offerings; pewter and white solar post caps also are new options. For installing railings with tight angles, the company has added

UNIVERSAL FOREST PRODUCTS



a color-matched hex-head screw to the stair-railing kit — in tight spaces, the hex head gives you the option of using a screwdriver or a small ratchet. Powder-coated hinges attach the rail and accommodate various stair rail angles. Latitudes kits ship directly from the warehouse within 48 hours, with no minimum order requirements.

For more product information, visit ebuild, Hanley Wood's interactive product catalog, at ebuild.com

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Figure 2. A lot of deck builders still buy components and blend parts from various suppliers. This design features Azek railing products and Deckorators balusters.

and hardware. As deck builder Robert Heidenreich, from The Deck Store in Apple Valley, Minn., puts it: “Kits seem to work best. Then there is no way salespeople forget stuff.” Tracking down your sales rep for materials that missed the delivery truck is a headache that wastes your time and delays the job. (Of course, there’s no guarantee that the correct number of kits will be on the truck.)

But while kits can work great for standard-sized rectangular decks, they have limitations when you’re building anything with odd angles or lots of levels. “Boxed kits for railings are nice, but components are better — they’re less expensive and offer greater flexibility,” says Matt Breyer of Reading, Penn.-based Breyer Construction and Landscape. “I can’t begin to tell you how many 2-foot-long cutoffs I’ve wasted over the years. You can try to design around it, but you’re often limited in your design based on the customer’s input and budget.” Cutoffs are hard to avoid, but some companies offer

kits in more than one length.

Installation

When all the components come from a single manufacturer in a nice, neat package, the parts are more likely to fit together correctly — and you won’t have forgotten some needed widget. Kits also probably offer the fastest way to install a railing. Still, some are easier to install than others, in large part thanks to the quality of the manufacturer’s instructions.

“Design with low maintenance used to be the main criteria, but now it’s generally ease of installation and how good an installation guide the manufacturer has to explain how to install rails with its products,” says Michele Moss of 1st Deck in Kansas City, Mo. Moss’s company often deals with angles and level changes that are more complicated than those tackled in a typical installation guide.

It’s a good idea to check out the installation guide before you even touch the product. You can usually download a PDF of the guide from

the manufacturer’s Web site — Azek, CertainTeed, and Trex are among the companies that offer this option.

Some companies step it up a notch and provide short installation videos to show you how to use their products. CorrectDeck, TimberTech, and Tamko all have video ready to view on their Web sites, and all three include instructions for stair-railing installation (the most difficult part of the process) in their videos.

Mixing It Up

Even as kits and good instructions simplify railing installation, clients with custom desires complicate it. A lot of deck builders end up mixing materials to customize railings, and manufacturers are paying attention.

One builder who combines components from different manufacturers is Bobby Parks, of Peachtree Decks and Porches in Alpharetta, Ga. He says, “The biggest seller is Deckorators aluminum balusters (deckorators.com) combined with wood components that are painted and topped with a composite or Azek rail cap,” (Figure 2). Sometimes, Parks might combine aluminum balusters and a special pre-punched track with Trex rail systems, instead of using Trex standard square balusters. Other elements he uses include Fortress iron rail sections, painted or stained 6x6 rail posts, post caps, and composite rail sleeves.

Larry Hopkins, president of Five Star Home Remodeling in Bridgewater, N.J., also uses components from more than one manufacturer in a single railing design. He says, “TimberTech allows me greater design options than other manufacturers. I can match the decking color or interchange different manufacturers’ balusters to its railing system to create a custom look, and I find the system very easy to work with.”

Some manufacturers incorporate

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Figure 3. It's becoming more common for manufacturers to offer hybrid kits that feature composite rails and metal balusters, or as in the case of Fiberon's ClearVisionSystem, a see-through option.

glass, cable, or stone into standard composite railing that matches the deck. For example, Fiberon's ClearVisionSystem replaces balusters with an acrylic shield, for those customers looking for a see-through railing system (**Figure 3**).

"I encourage my clients to pick the railings first, then the decking. I believe that you see the railings first, then the decking," says Hopkins.

If you or your clients need a little help visualizing the look of a proposed deck project, TimberTech has a cool tool on its Web site to mix and match railings with decking boards. Just click on the "Design a Deck"

option on the site's main menu.

When it comes down to it, it's not always just the look that wins out. "Cost of product or sales price tends to be the overriding factor for customers, and therefore also for us as contractors. Many customers may like a particular rail type or look but choose a less expensive but acceptable option due to budget constraints," says Bobby Parks. The ability to offer different options to customers may be what ends up closing the sale. ♦

Theresa Coleman writes on construction topics from her home in Ambler, Penn.