

Rustic Is in the Details

Careful craftsmanship and the right materials create an old-style hand-hewn look

by Bryan Parker

When I was just starting out in carpentry (as part of a cleanup crew), the word “rustic” would make me think of Granddad taking a stack of half-rotten 1x4s and a few 6-inch-diameter white pine trees, slapping them all together, and calling it his shed. Now that I’m a seasoned carpenter and general contractor, I define “rustic” a bit differently. The term can be used to describe crude structures that satisfy a basic need for shelter using locally available materials, but to me, it means a mountain lodge beaming with



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Figure 1. Keeping the tops of footings just below grade makes the support posts look like they grew from the ground.



Figure 2. Facing columns with native stone is a great way to tie the deck to the landscape.

accents that almost embed it into its surroundings. I use “rustic” to describe how I use thoughtful craftsmanship and mostly local materials to avoid an assembly-line manufactured look and add an old-world or timeless personality to a home. Another aspect of the look is its scale — rustic isn’t delicate, but there’s nothing crude about it. Decks are the perfect place to exercise this practice.

Start at the Bottom

There’s no reason a deck footing has to be raised out of the ground using a cardboard-tube concrete form. Keeping the top of the footing just below grade and using an anchor with a standoff allows drainage around the post (**Figure 1**). Some gravel around the base of the posts facilitates additional easy drainage. The posts — and the deck for that matter — then appear to grow out of the ground, instead of artificially sitting on top of it.

Don’t be afraid to use masonry and rock as posts (**Figure 2**). This can be more expensive, but it creates a substantial base for the deck that’s in keeping with the rustic style. It looks particularly nice when the foundation or basement is also faced with stone.

When I use traditional 6x6 treated posts, I make them look more rustic by getting creative with angle braces. When it’s

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Figure 3. Setting braces at 60 degrees to the posts mimics old timber-frame construction.

possible, I like to put angle braces on a 60-degree angle from the post instead of at the common 45-degree angle (**Figure 3**). Not only does this provide the look of a timber-framed structure, it has structural benefits, as it pushes the brace farther down the post and stiffens the post closer to its middle.

Carving the edges of the braces with a draw knife is another rustic touch that works well on the posts too (**Figure 4**). Get everything built and put together first, then go back and carve your edges. That way, you aren't carving where the brace meets the post, creating a funky spot.

Tree trunks of 12 inches in diameter or more make for great posts (**Figure 5**). Make sure you use a proper anchor, or better yet, a small base column covered with rock (**Figure 6, next page**), because usually this wood is not rated for ground contact, and this will help keep the post from rotting. Always check with your local building inspector for allowable designs and materials.

Trim the Rim

Although using a rot-prone wood like white pine anywhere on a deck is generally discouraged, feather board can make a great rim-joist cap (**Figure 7, next page**). Also sold as rustic-edge board or Adirondack siding, it has only one edge ripped straight,



Figure 4. Randomly chamfer the edges of posts and braces to create a time-worn look.

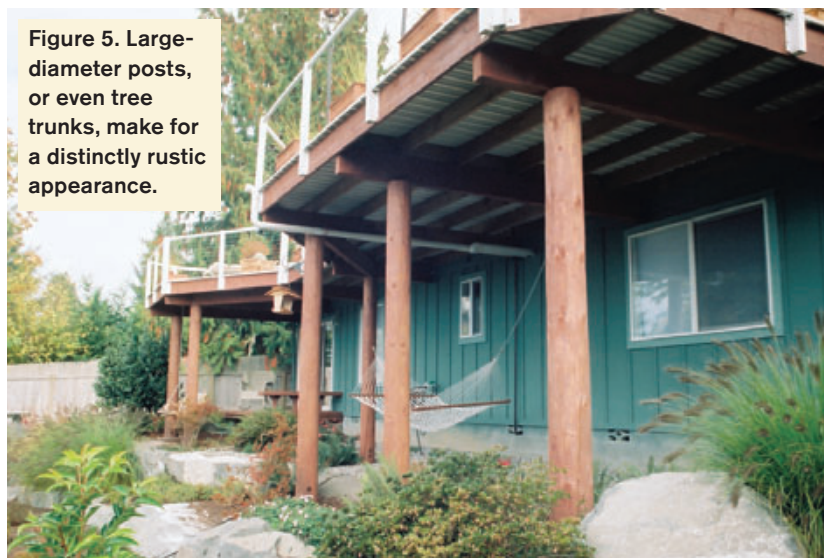


Figure 5. Large-diameter posts, or even tree trunks, make for a distinctly rustic appearance.

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while the other edge retains the shape of the log the board was sawn from. Feather board dresses up treated-wood framing and can be stained to add color or to visually tie the deck to the railing, wood siding, or logs. I do recommend treating it with a fungicide-insecticide product before you attach it. Typically, overhanging the deck boards by 1 inch will protect the feather board enough from water that it will last as long as the deck. Feather board is often available at local sawmills, is usually fairly cost friendly, and does not require any major labor.

Change the Decking

Using 2x6 decking instead of the more traditional 5/4 decking board adds bulk to the deck. Often cheaper than 5/4, it does require more labor. Buying at least #2 grade wood will help, but typically 2x6 is intended for framing, not finish use. It requires at least a touch of sanding, and you may also want to ease the edges with a router. I've seen it used with the square edge and no routing, too, and this actually makes a pretty, simple plank look that fits right in with houses trimmed out with a rustic flare.

As a side note, I don't recommend spacing green treated-lumber decking. Pack it tight, as it will shrink as it dries and space itself quite nicely.

Another option is ipe, which will cost more than pressure-treated wood. While ipe can look formal in some settings, I've found that I can create a truly old-time hardwood-floor look with factory seconds of tongue-and-groove ipe flooring. Although it may seem counterintuitive, perhaps because people expect tongue-and-groove floors on porches and not decks, this look is surprisingly rustic. You don't have to use a sealer, stain, or timber oil, but you can if desired.

The seconds I use are usually in random lengths and typically are no longer than 4 feet. The ends of the boards are also tongue-and-groove; I leave the end joints floating in the middle of the joist so as not



Figure 6. Stone bases not only tie wood columns to the ground, they elevate the wood so there's less chance of it rotting.



Figure 7. Feather board retains the profile of the saw log's edge for a rustic fascia.

to split them by nailing. I use a standard pneumatic floor nailer with galvanized staples.

Because there are no spaces between the boards to allow water to drain, I slope tongue-and-groove ipe decks by $\frac{1}{2}$ inch per 10 feet. Against the house, leave the standard $\frac{3}{4}$ -inch gap for hardwood flooring,

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which you can cover with trim. Again I suggest checking with your local building department before using a product like ipe. I once had to get paperwork from the manufacturer to prove to the building department the wood was approved for outdoor use.

Make an Impact With Railing

Another terrific and fairly easy addition to a rustic deck is precut round railing (**Figure 8**). This is usually made from white cedar and sold in 8-foot-long sections, but most producers will sell custom lengths for a small upcharge. I recommend buying the top and bottom rails without picket holes drilled in them by the manufacturer. This step is pretty simple to do on site, and you come out with much better spacing. A draw knife can be used to shave off any unwanted spots and pretty much reduce the amount of sanding to zero.

This type of railing will cost at least a third more than traditional treated-lumber railing. A great source for the material is log- or timber-home producers. They typically have very good pricing and will ship to the job site. They are also usually flexible enough to customize any sections you need, including long runs for stairs.

If you are going to use a regular treated-lumber railing, consider this option: Instead of using 2x2s as pickets, use 2x4s (**Figure 9**). Make your top and bottom rails 2x4s as well, and assemble them all into a mini-wall. Top it off with a 2x6 top plate screwed to the 2x4 top rail and you have a super-sturdy version of a traditional treated railing. Usually I find this to be about the same cost as the standard-style railing; the 2x4s are actually faster to install than 2x2 pickets. If you want to add an even more rustic look, just take a draw knife to the edges of the top plate and the posts.

There are countless ways to include rustic details in your decks. For me, the word “rustic” is about craftsmanship and quality. Capturing a little bit of timelessness in my work is satisfying and impresses my clients. ❖

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Figure 8. White cedar log railings are available through log-home distributors.



Figure 9. Use 2x4s for balusters to beef up a standard railing.