



Efficient Deck Demolition

It isn't glamorous work, but your crew can do it quickly and profitably with a little planning and the right tools

by Matthew Breyer

Like it or not, your company will occasionally have to remove an old deck before it can start building the new one. Some deck pros love this opportunity to destroy something archaic and unsafe, and actually look forward to the day an old deck's number comes up. Others prefer crafting new decks out of fresh lumber and modern materials; for them, removing a deck is an unpleasant but necessary means to an end, to be done as quickly as possible.

Our remodeling company has carpenters at both ends of the deck-destruc-

tion spectrum, and because we build or rebuild between 50 and 100 decks each year, we have plenty of work to satisfy each group. In the process, we've developed a few techniques that help us move quickly and safely through the deck demo process.

Planning

Deck removal is a low-margin activity, fraught with risk not only to the house and landscape belonging to our client, but also to the health and safety of our crew. No one wants to buy a new set of



Figure 1. The author's crew uses several different decking-removal tools, including the Duckbill Deck Wrecker (deckwrecker.com), which has steel jaws designed to straddle single or double 2-by framing.



Figure 2. The author's crew also uses the Demo-Dek (greentektools.com). It has a jaw design that doesn't require a joist or beam for leverage, and that holds the deck board in place after it has been removed.

French doors or replace a prized rose bush because an errant floor joist went the wrong way during removal. Even worse would be the prospect of needing to rush a co-worker to the emergency room. Planning helps us avoid such scenarios.

We start the process back at our shop, even before loading up the truck, by going over a plan of attack with the crew so that when we arrive on site, everyone knows where to be and what to do. Sharing a picture or two of the existing deck structure with the team prior to arrival helps eliminate the “let’s stand around and think about this” stage on site that every business owner dreads, and it helps everyone to be ready to begin work as quickly as possible.

If any of the old materials are to be salvaged, we make sure the crew knows exactly which ones, and where they should be stored after removal from the structure. With a little planning, we can avoid the hassle of moving these materials more than once.

Staffing

On our demo crew, we want individuals who can think together and work together, with a minimum of confusion or disagreement. What we don’t want is a line of people waiting for that next piece of decking to be pulled, or a mountain of removed pieces waiting for a single day laborer to move them to wherever the truck or trash container is parked.

Of course, every jobsite is different, and the perfect crew isn’t always available, but the key to keeping things moving safely and efficiently is to have the best individual possible at each stage of the process. For example, we like to have our “detail guy” remove the railing from the fancy stucco columns that must be saved, while Mr. Destructo focuses instead on peeling up old decking and hustling debris to its final destination.

Tools

We make sure to provide our crews with the right tools and as many supplies as they’ll need to get the job done right. These include a few extra tarps and trash cans, as well as brooms, rakes (for leaves and for dirt), and shovels (square and



Figure 3. A typical demolition job starts with rail removal, followed by the decking. For easier access, the steps are left in place until it's time to remove the framing.

Figure 4. Old joists and ledgers are rarely structurally adequate or flashed properly, and must be removed and replaced.

oversized, for picking up the smaller debris off the ground).

To take a deck apart, we prefer to use corded circular and reciprocating saws, and keep a cordless recip saw kit handy for use in a pinch. Lenox and Milwaukee make excellent recip demo blades, and we use Diablo almost exclusively for circular saw blades. While we've occasionally used chain saws, they aren't a regular part of our tool kit—they're not very precise, the speed gains are marginal, and when used for deck deconstruction they present an increased safety risk to our workers.

We always keep a decent mechanical set on hand with sockets and a few adjustable wrenches for the inevitable old lag bolts and weird brackets that are best removed rather than cut out. Our set also includes vise-grip pliers for the rounded-off bolt heads that we're always sure to find.

Once upon a time, we did all our disassembly with digging irons and pry bars. Fortunately, now there is a wide assortment of decking-removal tools that can pop up deck boards with relative ease. While the tools look similar, our crew members each seem to have a preference, and each deck requires a slightly different plan of attack. So we stock several different kinds and select the best one for a particular situation (**Figures 1, 2**).

Systematic Deck Removal

We try to remove as much of the deck as we can and reduce the deck's weight as quickly as possible, while retaining accessibility and support for the structure we are working on and around. Generally, this means removing the railings first and cutting them into large sections (we usually cut rails at the post) that will stack well. Then we strip up

the decking a piece at a time, leaving the steps and framing for last (**Figures 3, 4**).

We remove the floor joists one at a time, often retaining a few temporarily to keep a beam in place. If a beam is too large to remove all at once, we cut it into smaller sections. We leave stairs up until we no longer need them, occasionally adding temporary supports to hold up posts while we remove beams and stair stringers.

Generally, the last item we work on is the old deck ledger, which almost always needs to be replaced. It's much easier to safely get ladders into place to remove any bolts and inspect and prep the house wall once everything else is out of the way.

Disposal

Lots of builders simply order a 40-yard trash bin, park it out front, and let the trash hauler worry about the debris once



Figure 5. A cordless circular saw is handy for cutting old decking and framing to length so that it stacks efficiently in the back of a pickup truck or in a cargo or dump trailer.

Figure 6. The author keeps plenty of ratchet straps and bungee cords on hand to secure loads.



it has been filled up. But in our area, it's often difficult to place a large trash bin so that it's near the site of the actual demolition. Rental costs continue to rise, too, and additional permitting requirements and client and neighbor concerns have caused us to rethink that strategy. Now, we haul all of our own debris off-site to a trash container that resides permanently at our shop. We rent the bin from a small local carrier on a monthly basis, and simply pay disposal and hauling fees as we incur them.

Wherever the truck or trash container is parked, old deck pieces need to be carried by hand away from the backyard where the deck is located. To make that path from deck to destination as short and easy-to-manuever as possible, we eliminate obstacles by removing patio furniture and other items, and temporarily prop open any gates.

Often, we put down sheets of OSB or tarps to protect patios or lawns, and to make collecting small debris easier. Rather than dropping smaller parts onto the ground, and then picking them back up moments later as we clean up the site, we try to collect them in trash cans as we work. For larger items that will require extra hands to move, we make sure the pieces are staged in a way that will allow them to be safely grabbed, either on solid sawhorses or sitting slightly elevated on blocking.

To transport the old deck debris back to our trash container, we use a combination of standard pickup trucks with open utility beds and ladder racks, and trailers (both open and dumping) (**Figure 5**). We leave the small pieces in their trash cans, and load the filled cans onto a truck, which makes it easier to dispose of the debris back at our shop. Longer decking

is usually strapped down onto a ladder rack. Given the weight, we prefer to use a trailer for the joists, posts, and beams. To help hold loads together, we often strap railings down onto the top.

While it may be mundane work, carefully stacking the materials properly into the trucks and trailers to maximize use of space and keep loose items secure is critical—once everything is loaded and properly strapped down, we don't want anything shifting or coming loose as we travel.

We use large ratchet straps to provide the primary security for the deck debris, and smaller ratchet straps to secure secondary areas (like holding a particularly long stack of decking all together) (**Figure 6**). We have plenty of bungee cords on hand, too, which we use as needed for loose pieces, such as balusters, that need some extra security.



Figure 7. During demolition, old PT framing that is in reasonable shape and that can be reused or recycled is stacked and set aside, rather than sent to the landfill.

Figure 8. The author tries to coordinate schedules so that construction of the new deck can begin even while part of his crew is finishing up demolition of the old one.



In our area, we don't have a single-source recycler of old lumber, so we deposit all of the small bits and pieces, old hardware, and other debris into our trash container at our shop. But we've developed several contacts who reuse old lumber for home and farm projects, so often we can save salvageable building materials for them. Occasionally we will pull apart a deck with some near-perfect framing, which we might clean up and set aside for a personal project or charity event (**Figure 7**).

In your area, there might be companies and individuals who want old building materials, and it would be worth your while to find out who they are. Just ask

around at local lumberyards and at the city dump or transfer station or perhaps put an ad up on Craigslist. Anything that can be diverted away from the landfill without overwhelming cost or effort is worth exploring.

A Profit Center

Deck deconstruction brings with it several often-overlooked areas of opportunity. For the business owner, it may seem enticing to send out the lowest-paid grunts to remove a deck and reserve the higher-paid carpenters for higher-margin work. But I've found that it pays to have some seniority on site. An experienced carpenter will take advantage

of the removal of an old deck, and use it as an opportunity to better prepare for the new deck's construction, scout out areas to improve efficiency for your work, and look for items to upsell to your clients. He'll also be able to teach the younger guys how to best fill the trucks safely and explain work-arounds when the crew encounters difficult existing house conditions.

When the schedule allows, we try to have new materials delivered while we're on site doing the demo work. This way, we can make sure everything arrives in proper order and minimize the risk of a misdelivered "surprise" later on. We can also make sure that materials are staged in the best location, rather than randomly by the delivery crew (**Figure 8**).

Since we often set up ladders when removing an old deck ledger, we try to install our new ledgers with the proper flashing and joist layout at the same time. This eliminates some head-scratching later on and is a big help if we sub out the deck framing. It also lets us know if we have a house repair lurking behind an old unflashed deck ledger to discuss with our client, and helps us to properly prepare for that repair at our next visit.

Finally, this is a good time to look for upsell opportunities. I tell my on-site guys to keep their eyes open while working on the deconstruction to see if there are any old doors that should be replaced, or patios that need maintenance. Perhaps the new deck would look better with some decorative stone added underneath it. Getting this feedback early in the process allows us to bring these upgrades to our clients' attention when there is enough time to fit them into the schedule should the clients decide to add any of them to the scope of work. ♦

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