DECK BUILDERS OTTAWA

Repair, Finishes & Upkeep

Board replacement, stains and penetrating finishes, re-coat intervals, older CCA-treated decks, and bringing guards and stairs up to current rules

4 Expert Answers from Deck IQ

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Q1

Staining an older CCA deck in Ottawa every year?

Health Canada recommends applying a sealant every year to older CCA-treated decks, using an oil-based or water-based stain. That same guidance says paints and other film-forming finishes are not recommended for this purpose.

The USDA Forest Products Laboratory supports the penetrating-finish approach for decks generally. The FPL says film-forming finishes, including paint and solid stain, are very difficult to maintain on decking and are rated low suitability for that surface. Penetrating finishes need to be refreshed every few years, and the FPL's US figures give some guidance on intervals: a water-repellent preservative lasts about 1 to 2 years, a tinted deck finish about 1 to 2 years on smooth-sawn boards and 2 to 3 years on weathered or saw-textured boards, and a semitransparent stain about 2 to 3 years on new boards and 3 to 6 years on weathered ones. These are US figures, and the FPL notes that expected life depends on climate and exposure.

A few things to keep in mind with an older CCA deck. Health Canada notes that residential decks built before 2004 are likely to have been made from CCA-treated lumber. Health Canada says CCA is no longer available for residential construction projects. Health Canada says never to burn CCA-treated wood, indoors or outdoors. When you sand or saw it, wear a dust mask, eye protection, gloves and long sleeves. For the annual stain application itself, the same precautions apply if you are doing any surface preparation that creates dust.

The FPL's main point about why wood decks get replaced is worth keeping in mind: the most common reason is checking and splitting, not decay. Keeping water beading on the surface, rather than soaking in, is the best way to slow that process. Health Canada's yearly sealant advice for CCA decks and the FPL's preference for penetrating finishes point the same way.

On the permit side, we found no City of Ottawa statement on whether refinishing or staining an existing deck requires a permit. If you are doing anything beyond the finish, such as replacing boards or making structural changes, ask the City's Building Code Services before starting.

If you are thinking of hiring someone for the preparation and staining work, the question worth settling before you agree to anything is what surface preparation they plan to do and which specific product they intend to apply, so you can confirm it is a penetrating oil or water-based stain rather than a film-forming finish.

Q2

Stain or paint for a wood deck in Ottawa?

For a wood deck in Ottawa, penetrating finishes, meaning semi-transparent stains and water-repellent preservatives, are what the USDA Forest Products Laboratory recommends over paint and solid stains. Paint and solid stains are rated low suitability for decking because film-forming finishes are very difficult to maintain on a horizontal walking surface, and penetrating finishes have to be refreshed every few years.

Here is what the FPL figures look like in practice, keeping in mind these are US data and that expected life depends on climate and exposure:

- Water-repellent preservative: 1 to 2 years before recoating
- Semi-transparent stain on new, smooth-sawn boards: 2 to 3 years
- Semi-transparent stain on weathered or saw-textured boards: 3 to 6 years
- Tinted deck finish on new smooth-sawn boards: 1 to 2 years
- Tinted deck finish on weathered or saw-textured boards: 2 to 3 years

The condition of your boards matters: the FPL figures give longer intervals on weathered or saw-textured boards than on new smooth-sawn ones. The FPL's main point on longevity is that keeping water beading on the surface, rather than soaking in, is the best way to prevent checking and splitting, which is the most common reason wood decks are replaced, not decay.
If your deck was built before 2004, Health Canada notes it may contain CCA-treated lumber. For those older boards, Health Canada suggests applying a sealant every year using an oil- or water-based stain, and specifically says paints and other film-forming finishes are not recommended. For newer treated lumber, use the FPL decking intervals above and follow the product label.

One practical note: if you are refinishing an existing deck rather than finishing new boards, follow the label of the finish you choose for application conditions, coverage and recoat timing.

We found no City of Ottawa permit or zoning rule about refinishing a deck. If you are planning a new deck or replacement alongside the finishing work, the permit rules, inspections and material requirements would apply to the structural work.

When you are comparing quotes for any deck work that goes alongside refinishing, ask each builder to spell out exactly which line items, such as railings, stairs, removal of an existing deck, permit drawings and foundation work, are included in the price and which are not.

Q3

Water repellent on a new Ottawa deck: how long does it last?

A water-repellent preservative on a new deck lasts about 1 to 2 years, according to US data from the USDA Forest Products Laboratory. The same source rates semitransparent stain at 2 to 3 years on new wood and 3 to 6 years on weathered or saw-textured boards.

The Forest Products Laboratory recommends penetrating finishes for decks rather than film-forming ones. Paints and solid stains are rated low suitability for decking because film-forming finishes are very difficult to maintain on a walking surface. Penetrating finishes have to be refreshed every few years. The goal the FPL describes is keeping water beading on the surface rather than soaking in: that is what slows checking and splitting, which the FPL says is the most common reason wooden decks are replaced.

For older decks that were built before 2004, Health Canada notes they may have been made with CCA-treated lumber, and for those decks Health Canada suggests applying a sealant every year using an oil- or water-based stain. Paints and other film-forming finishes are not recommended for CCA decks either.

A couple of practical points worth keeping in mind:

- The 1 to 2 year and 2 to 3 year figures are US data from the Forest Products Laboratory, and the source says expected life depends on climate and exposure, so treat those intervals as a starting point rather than a guarantee.
- Follow the product label for the specific finish you choose. The label will tell you the application conditions and the recoat interval the manufacturer stands behind.

If your deck is attached to the house and its walking surface is more than 600 mm (24 in.) above grade, or if it is an elevated deck providing principal access to the building, the City of Ottawa requires a building permit for the structure itself. We found no City rule about refinishing an existing deck, and if you are planning any structural repairs or replacement of framing at the same time, it is worth confirming with the City's Building Code Services whether a permit is needed for that work before you start.

Q4

When should a new Ottawa deck get its first stain?

We found no government or standards-body source that sets when a new deck should get its first finish, so follow the finish manufacturer's label and ask your builder what the product they use says. What the USDA Forest Products Laboratory does give is how finishes behave on decking once they are on.

The FPL's finish table gives these re-coat intervals for decking: tinted deck finishes last 1 to 2 years on new smooth-sawn boards and 2 to 3 years on weathered or saw-textured boards; semitransparent stain lasts 2 to 3 years on new boards and 3 to 6 years on weathered ones. A water-repellent preservative lasts only 1 to 2 years. Those are US figures, and the source says expected life depends on climate and exposure. The FPL recommends penetrating finishes for decks because film-forming finishes such as paint and solid stain are very difficult to maintain on a walking surface, and penetrating finishes have to be refreshed every few years.

A few points worth keeping in mind:

- The FPL notes that copper-based waterborne treatments may keep a brown colour for about 2 years.
- Its core advice is to keep water beading on the surface instead of soaking in, and the FPL says wooden decks are most commonly replaced because of checking and splitting, not decay.
- For older decks built before 2004, Health Canada notes they may contain CCA-treated lumber; if so, consider applying a sealant every year using an oil- or water-based stain, and avoid film-forming products.

If your deck used composite or PVC decking rather than wood, the finishing question is different: follow the manufacturer's care guide; we found no neutral cleaning or upkeep interval for those materials.
If you hire the finishing out, ask which product and preparation the quote covers.

Disclaimer: This guide is provided for informational purposes only by Deck Builders Ottawa. It does not constitute professional advice. Always consult qualified contractors and your local building authority (the City of Ottawa's Building Code Services) before starting any deck project. Decks in Ottawa are built under the 2024 Ontario Building Code (O. Reg. 163/24) and the City's permit and zoning rules. Information is current as of November 15, 2026 and may change. Visit **deckbuildersottawa.ca** for the latest answers.