



professional  
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2336 Wisteria Drive, Suite 240  
Snellville, GA 30078  
Address Change Requested

*Guide to  
Composite Decking*



# Mold: A Fact of Life (Even with Composites)

By Anne W. West

Photo courtesy Deck Builders, Inc.

Consumers eagerly embraced composite products when they were introduced, believing that they were virtually maintenance free. The fact is that they do require some regular maintenance. The issue surfaced in 2000 when four New Jersey homeowners filed suit against Trex Company, alleging misrepresentation of the product, including problems with mold. In 2004, the Superior Court of New Jersey allowed the case to become a nationwide class action lawsuit. Trex Company disputes the allegations in the lawsuit, but decided to settle out of court.

The litigation brought to light one of the most frequent consumer complaints about composite decking – the buildup of mold and mildew on the deck surface. Mold and mildew are often used interchangeably as generic terms that

describe a naturally occurring growth on a surface. There are thousands of mold spores floating in a cubic foot of air, and mold spores can be found on any indoor or outdoor surface.

Mold needs a food source, moisture, and the proper temperature to grow. That food source can include dirt, pollen, pollutants, leaf litter, or food spills. Without moisture, the mold spores lie dormant until favorable conditions occur. When mold releases spores and dies, it changes to a dark color, which is the stain that appears on a deck or other surface. Regular cleaning of the surface helps remove food sources as well as dormant mold spores and reduces the likelihood of mold growing on the surface.

“Mold has nothing to do with composites or with lumber,” says Rick

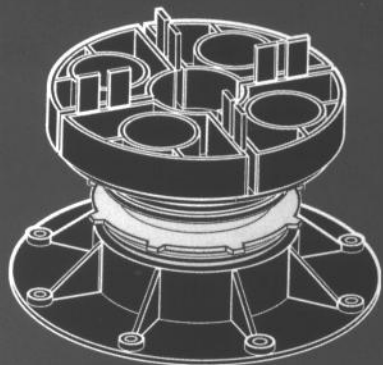
Trottier, Technical Sales Manager, CorrectDeck, Biddeford, Maine. “The consumer has to understand that mold can grow on anything, but as long as the deck surface is kept clean, it’s less likely that mold will have a chance to congregate and grow there.” He adds that when the mold does grow, it releases more spores and magnifies the problem.

CorrectDeck led the composite industry by addressing the mold issue when it added mold inhibitors to its composite products in 1999. Last year, CorrectDeck began utilizing Microban® technology to help prevent damaging mold. Microban antimicrobial product protection can be found in hundreds of consumer and industrial, products around the world, ranging from towels to air conditioning units.

When microbes come in contact



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with the product surface, Microban protection penetrates the cell wall of the microorganism and disrupts cell functions, disabling the microorganism's ability to function, grow, and reproduce. "The biggest complaints with composites are about color retention, staining, and mold and mildew. We've been working hard to address all of those," says Trottier. "With Microban protection, we've engineered an added level of mold resistance into the surface of the board. The composite material used in our boards also holds color better and are virtually unstainable." The Microban antimicrobial protection will be added to CorrectDeck's railing products in mid-2006 and to other products by the end of the year.

In 2000, LP became the second manufacturer to offer mold-resistant composite products. The company blends zinc borate, or "ZB" into its decking and railing products as a biocide to protect against fungal decay and to inhibit growth of mold and mildew. ZB has a proven track record as an effective and environmentally sound mold, decay,

and insect inhibitor in a number of building products, including wood composite panels, lumber, and exterior siding. LP WeatherBest uses the ZB formula in all of its decking and railing products.

"When we develop a product, we look for the best way to create a board that will perform, because performance and quality are two of our benchmarks," says Sandra Bostian, Assistant Brand Manager, Louisiana Pacific, Nashville, Tennessee.

LP was so confident of their mold inhibitor that they hired an independent laboratory to test their product against nine competitors. "In the eight-week test, our product showed the least mold and mildew growth," Bostian adds. "We're constantly testing our product, so we feel we are on top of the quality curve in composites."

The addition of mold inhibitors adds to the overall cost of producing a composite product, but manufacturers believe the additional cost is offset by the benefits to the consumer. The addition doesn't change maintenance requirements or product warranties, which






on decks, Trottier uses the analogy of preventive versus cosmetic maintenance on an automobile. Preventive maintenance, such as an oil change, preserves the life of the car, much like a stain or coating protects a deck surface from rot. Cosmetic maintenance, such as a car wash, simply makes it look better. "Mold and mildew can't get to the wood fibers in composites because we've covered that surface with a stronger material. Lumber fails when the mold keeps eating at the wood. With composites, mold is really only an eyesore on the surface of the board," Trottier points out.

While mold inhibitors help retard the growth of mold on composite products, they don't totally block mold growth. Routine maintenance of the deck surface still is needed to prevent mold and mildew, prolong the life of the deck, and keep it looking better over time. The deck should be cleaned with regular sweeping and washing to help prevent mold spores from adhering to the surface. Food spills should be wiped

up as soon as possible to eliminate a food source for mold and to prevent stains. Gutters should be checked to be sure they aren't backed up and overflowing onto the deck surface, which can provide a source of food and moisture for mold. Because yard mulch is full of mold and mildew spores, it should not be used around or under the deck. Avoid contact between lawn and plant fertilizer and the deck surface.

"Controlling mold is something everyone in our industry is going to want to achieve in the future," predicts Trottier. "It's another improvement to the outdoor living feature a deck provides." 

typically don't offer protection against mold and mildew or food stains.

When discussing mold and mildew

#### About the Author

Anne W. West is a freelance writer based in Atlanta, Georgia.



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