

Teak-The Care of Boat Hardwoods

In this article we will look at the several alternate methods of restoring and preserving teak on your boat or yacht in order to place you in a more informed position to decide on which method best suits your situation.

Whether it be a lovely piece of teak furniture sitting elegantly on the aft deck of a luxury yacht, or a 12" by 12" inch pad under a sheet winch on a daysailer, there's just something about teak that says "salty."

It has been said that nothing so brightens the nautical appearance of a boat so much as well maintained teak. Having made such a sweeping generalization we are now faced with numerous variations on just what makes teak well maintained.

If our boats lived in clean air we could let the wood go. Over time, it would weather naturally to an attractive ash gray and we could concern ourselves with other things. Unfortunately the assault of modern-day air pollutants, the proximity to the sea, and old father sun himself quickly turn bare teak nearly black. Scrubbing only removes some of the stains leaving a mottled look.

As beautiful as it is here on The Emerald Coast where I write this, it only takes a few days to see the effects of air pollutants and intense sunlight on anything left outside.

Preparation

Regardless of the method of preservation used the first thing which must be done is to clean and restore the teak to its natural state.

At BoatDocs1 we believe in accomplishing this in the gentlest way possible while still achieving the desired results. If the teak is just dirty a thorough cleaning with laundry detergent, chlorine bleach, scrub brush, and a little elbow grease will do the job.

If the wood has weathered for long, has remnants of a previous sealer, varnish, lacquer, or the like, and/or if mildew has set in we will have to use oxalic acid to kill the organisms, bleach out the black and stained areas, and deep clean the wood.

If you are doing this yourself the main thing to remember is that anything remaining from a previous product will interfere with the bonding of the new coating. This can cause anything from a minor color shift to causing the new coat to not stick at all and actually blister and peel away from the surface.

So take your time, use plenty of water to rinse away all of the soap and residue of previous products and allow at least 24 hours drying time before your first coat.

As with any paint, lacquer, or varnish, it is the preparation that sets the professional results apart from the want-to-be attempts. If you figure on about a 80 /20 ratio for preparation to application you should be pretty close.

Everybody and their dog can swing a paint brush but it takes a little savvy and a good bit of patience to hold off on the brush till the wood is ready. Without that forbearance the job is doomed before the can is ever opened.

Now the choices begin.

Teak Oil

Teak oil is one of the oldest and in many ways easiest methods of maintaining the natural look to teak.

More choices, linseed or tung oil. In general, tung oil is a more refined version of linseed oil. The higher quality/price is an individual call depending on the application.

Our main concern here is the various additives including pigments, UV filters, and mildew retardants. The additives

are a must here on the Emerald Coast and anywhere you have the combination of sun, heat, humidity, and sea air. The choices should be based on the exposure to the elements the wood will be getting, with the higher concentrations of additives and corresponding darker pigmentation for any wood which will be exposed a great deal of the time.

Characteristics: Gives the wood a matte finish without shiny spots. Requires recoating periodically, 1-3 months depending on exposure factors. While teak oils, when properly applied and maintained resist and displace water they do not completely eliminate it's getting into the wood. (works well but requires frequent maintenance or will tend to turn black and degrade rapidly) A big plus is that unless the wood is very rough, no sanding should be required.

Teak Sealer

Teak sealers are actually an adjunct to Teak Oil in that they seal in the oil and lengthen the time between applications. We have had excellent results with several products in our climate and the choices are mostly related to desired look and durability.

Sealers are a good choice for those who don't mind doing a little extra work at the beginning and end of the season in order to not have to worry about it during.

Characteristics: Teak treated with sealer is more water resistant than if treated with teak oil, has a more uniform appearance, and doesn't tend to turn black. Slightly more preparation required than with oil but if maintained will only have to be done once. (when wood is well prepared and the sealer applied correctly it will last up to a year between maintenance application) Only initial sanding required, (prior to first coat) none needed between coats.

Varnish

Ah, the beauty of a newly varnished teak deck.

On the plus side:

Offers real protection for the wood.

Wood will not dry out and split

" will not absorb moisture and rot

" is unaffected by dirt and pollution

" will not be stained by spills

The not-so-plus side:

Varnishing any wood requires thorough and painstaking sanding and preparation.

The standard for a ship-shape job is 7 coats with sanding between each coat. I've often done 12 to 14 to achieve desired results.

Additional coats, with thorough sanding between, are required to maintain the look.

The humidity must be low or a milky appearance will result, requiring more sanding to remove the affected coat.

Characteristics:

Poems have been written about the beauty of well varnished teak and I'll leave it to them to do their job on this one. From a purely practical point of view, if you have the time to do-it-yourself or the money to have a professional take care of it for you then varnish will preserve the wood better than any other method and at the same time be a beautiful accent to your yacht.

The Road Less Traveled

I should mention one more possibility before closing, one that I've used myself on a couple of occasions. If you watch old seafaring movies you've seen this one too. Teak decks can be scrubbed periodically with sea water and a stiff brush and will actually last about the same length of time as an oiled deck.

The main drawback to this is that without any protection the wood will absorb everything which is spilled on it, and many modern oils and greases, to say nothing of not so modern wines and berries will leave stains which will be just about imposable to remove. On the other hand if you have a lot of teak on your boat you could likely write a book with the time you would save by not having to keep up the varnish.

Whatever you decide, may all of your boating adventures be happy ones.

Short note about the author

James "Doc" Lewis has been "messin about in boats" for as long as he can remember. He is owner/operator of BoatDocs1, a full-service boat detailing-yacht maintenance business serving the Emerald Coast region of Florida. To learn more about boats and keeping them looking their best visit his web site at: <http://www.boatdocs1.com/>

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