

TEAK *The Other Hardwood*

Many boaters have a classic love-hate relationship with their teak: When it is beautiful and shining (perhaps with a fresh coat of oil, varnish or some other glistening coating), we stand back and smile at the fresh warm glow that the tropical hardwood gives off (we might even pull a dock mate over to show it off). But turn your back on it for a few weeks and teak betrays you: Coatings peel, varnish cracks and left untreated, teak grays like an old piece of firewood left out in the back yard to season.

Tired of the yearly sanding, taping and coating ritual? Then there are some alternative replacement options available. However, if that natural, freshly cleaned look of natural teak still stirs your blood, there are some great low-maintenance tips to keep it looking Bristol-fashion throughout the season.

Teak: What is it?

Teak is a tropical hardwood that grows natively in the dry hilly terrain of Southeast Asia, but is today mainly harvested from farms that grow the trees specifically for export. Very few virgin-growth teak forests exist any longer. Teak trees are capable of growing to heights of 150 feet, have a gray-colored bark and normally mature 70 to 80 years after planting.

What makes the heartwood of a teak tree so appealing for use on boats is not only its naturally beautiful golden-brown color, but also its trademark oily characteristic, which makes it very weather and rot resistant.

Natural teak lumber ranges in price from \$13 to \$20 a board foot depending on quality and cut. It is very easily worked with a variety of tools, making for easy fabrication into a variety of shapes.

Get Scrubbing

If you are starting out with a boat full of dirty, grayed out teak, the first thing you will need to do is give it a good cleaning. Buying a teak cleaner at the marine supply store these days is kind of like trying to figure out what kind of detergent to wash your clothes with.

There are so many cleaners available on the market today that the myriad of choices can be mind-boggling. No need to fret: A few basic categories of teak cleaners are all you need to know to make a good choice.

Before we even talk about cleaners, the most important thing to remember about scrubbing teak is never to scrub with the grain, no matter what type of scrubbing apparatus you are using. When you scrub with the grain, regardless of the cleaner, you will quickly remove the softer-grained wood of the teak, resulting in unsightly ridges after you have finished the cleaning process.

It's always best to scrub across the grain in order to protect the wood. As far as scrubbing tools, a good soft-bristled scrub brush works well, as do any of 3M's scrub pads, which tend to be easier on the wood.

First, figure out how badly your teak is weathered and what condition it is in. A lightly weathered piece of teak will obviously need a lighter-duty cleaner than a piece that has been left untreated in the sun for a few years.

For the purpose of simplicity, we will refer to three basic conditions of teak: lightly weathered, mildly weathered and severely weathered. Also, a word of warning before starting: Some stronger cleaners can discolor or blister expensive paints such as Awlgrip or Imron. If your boat is painted with these coatings, make sure that you keep it well rinsed down with water, and work with the teak in small areas at a time, using lots of water to keep things protected.

For lightly weathered teak (light gray color with no black spots or dirt stains), a simple oxalic acid powder cleaner will normally do the trick. Boat Life Teak Brite Cleaner makes a good-quality oxalic acid powder, which works very well on teak.

When working with Teak Brite Cleaner, wet down the teak and sprinkle on the powder. Scrub the teak until clean, repeating the application if necessary, and then rinse away the dirt and cleaner residue very thoroughly. If you still notice some dirty spots, simply repeat the procedure until satisfied with the results.

Moderately weathered teak (dark gray color with black spots and possibly a little algae growth) will require a



[from left to right] Two-part cleaner, oxalic acid cleaner and two phosphoric acid cleaners.



Brand new teak is a beautiful golden color.

stronger acid-based cleaner to get results. One of my favorite teak cleaners is actually an excellent general-purpose detergent to have around the boat as well. MDR's Krazy Klean, aside from its goofy name, is an excellent cleaner for teak.

I often buy the quart size of Krazy Klean, which has a squirt top to it, making for easy application. If you have a large amount of teak to do, buy the gallon size, and then purchase an empty spray bottle to go along with it. Simply fill the bottle and use the spray bottle to apply the cleaner. Amazon also produces a good teak cleaner, which I have also had good results with, but since I am a big fan of keeping it simple, I use the Krazy Klean so I can also use it to scrub down the boat.

First wet down the teak you are cleaning, and then apply an even layer of Krazy Klean or Amazon's One Step Cleaner to the wood. At first, the cleaner will darken the wood; this is normal and is no reason for worry.

Scrub across the grain using your favorite brush or pad until clean, and then rinse very well. These phosphoric acid cleaners do tend to leave a residue, so you will want to use lots of water to get it all off. As with the process for lightly weathered teak, if you are not happy with the results on your first try, give it another go, but be sure to rinse thoroughly when done.

Some teak is so filthy and has been neglected for so long that it nearly turns black. There are two-part cleaners to remedy this situation, but they should be your weapons of last resort; try Krazy Klean first. These harsh chemicals such as TE-KA Teak Cleaner consist of a strong acid cleaner (Part A), and a neutralizer (Part B), that is

applied after the teak has been scrubbed down. And while they are extremely effective and can produce jaw-dropping results to severely weathered teak, they also have a nasty tendency to eat away at the softer part of the teak grain, which causes unattractive ridges in the wood.

Getting rid of these ridges often requires sanding after the wood has dried to remove the high spots created by the cleaner. You will want to have a good pair of rubber gloves and wear protective eyewear and clothing when using this type of cleaner.

Working in small areas, apply Part A and allow it to work for a minute or two. The teak will normally turn almost black in color, which is normal. After the cleaner has had a chance to work, give a light scrubbing (light being the key word) to the wood, and then apply the Part B neutralizer. This will turn the wood a golden brown color, at which point you should start thoroughly rinsing the wood.

Continue working with the cleaner until all of the teak is clean, repeating the outlined steps above. Remember, this stuff will eat through anything, including your skin and delicate boat finishes (so take the proper precautions), but it is extremely effective when used properly and carefully.

Once you have your teak cleaned up, give it a good sanding with a moderate to fine grade sandpaper (220 or lower) to smooth it out and remove any residual deterioration. Once the teak is smooth, clean and sanded and taped off, you're ready to apply a protective coating.

TEAK RESOURCES

- PLASTEAK: 800.320.1841; www.plasteak.com
- Tek-Dek: www.tekdek.com
- MDR/AMAZON'S: 516-546-1162; www.mdramazon.com
- EPIFANES: www.epifanes.com
- INTERLUX: www.interlux.com

Cover it Up

Snake oil salesmen have been peddling all-in-one coating solutions for teak finishes since the very first piece of teak was bolted on to a boat. Some of them actually work, but unfortunately, many of them do not work well at all. We will discuss some of the winners on the market and save you the expense and trouble of trial and error.

Oils

Oils provide excellent visual results, but do require periodic (usually bi-monthly) reapplications to remain effective. Do not expect to spend a weekend cleaning all of your teak, and then apply a coat or two of oil only to forget about it for the season. You will need to reapply the oil every couple of weeks throughout the season to keep it looking good.



Some popular varnishes, oils and sealers.

SPRING PREP GUIDE



A companionway in need of some TLC.



Ladders made with Plasteak.

Oil is a good option for interior teak, or for boat owners who do not have but one or two small pieces of exterior teak. Amazon's makes a couple of excellent teak oils, as does Tip-Top-Teak. Applying oil to your teak is simple: simply apply the oil with a brush, allow it to soak in, and remove any excess with a clean rag making sure to wipe up and spills or drips. You can repeat the process a couple of times to ensure good saturation into the wood. Any drips can be cleaned up with a rag dipped in a little denatured alcohol.

Sealers

One of the more popular teak coatings on the market today is a product called Cetol. Introduced in the mid 90s, Silkkins Cetol promised an end to the labor-intensive application associated with varnish coatings and was purported to last a year or more between maintenance coats.

Another advantage of Cetol is that it does not require sanding between coats like varnish does (as long as each subsequent coat is applied within 24 hours). Cetol is a semi-transparent coating, which has an "orangish" tint and a semi-gloss finish. A high-gloss version is also available, but must be applied over a minimum of three base coats of the regular semi-gloss or "Cetol Light" flavor to properly protect the wood. Armada Wood Finish and Deks Olje are similar products that have equaled if not identical characteristics to Cetol if you are unable to find Cetol at your local marine store.

One draw back to using these products is that they might not be compatible with other sealants that were already used on the teak. Using these sealants require complete removal of previous sealants.

Teak Luster is a new water-based product manufactured by Amazon, a company that produces a wide range

of teak care products from oils and cleaners to sealers and brushes. According to the company, this product is a clear water-based coating that not only dries within 15 to 20 minutes, but also allows subsequent coats to be applied within 30 minutes and no sanding between coats.

This means you can apply the recommended three coats in an afternoon's work. Available in gloss and semi-gloss finishes, this new product will reportedly last three years without peeling, cracking or fading and repairs can easily be made with little prep work. This product is compatible with most other sealants as well.

Varnish

Traditional clear varnish has a semi-sweet reputation as a beautiful yet high-maintenance coating. Yet when properly applied, there is nothing more beautiful than a piece of teak with 8 to 12 coats of high-gloss marine spar varnish.

The only downside to varnish is that the application process is extremely labor-intensive (varnish requires a



A nicely varnished toe-rail

light sanding between each coat, and applying the syrupy substance has often been described as an art form).

With these caveats aside, I'm going to let you in on a little secret: While varnish may have a reputation for being a high-maintenance coating, it is really a very durable coating when properly applied. The only catch is that it requires at least 12 coats to truly last.

On my own boat, once I had 15 base coats down, my teak then only required a once-a-year maintenance service of two coats. That's a lot of prep work, but to have the beauty of varnish with a minor once-a-year maintenance program is a real treat.

Epifanes is by far the king of high-gloss spar varnishes. High in UV filters and solids, I have gone as long as 18 months before having to recoat the top layers. Other popular brands include Z-Spar's Flagship varnish and Interlux's Schooner line of varnishes, which most marine supply stores carry. So if you are willing to invest some hard work in building your base coats and like the appearance of a mirror-finish, varnish may very well be for you.

Teak Replacement Options

So you've had it. You have gotten to the point where you are ready to take a crowbar and rip every last piece of teak off your boat and throw it in the dumpster. You'll never scrub another piece of teak again. Luckily, a few manufacturers are now producing maintenance-free teak replacement options that are as close to real teak as you can get - without the cleaning and constant care.

Plasteak is an Akron, Ohio company that specializes in providing original equipment manufacturers and after-market consumers with a no-maintenance solution to teak fixtures so commonly found on boats. The company manufactures a wide variety of plastic teak-simulated



The sailor has done a nice job with Cetol on their cockpit coaming and companionway teak.

A WORD ON TAPE

Normal masking tape from your local hardware store has no place on your boat as it is not designed to withstand the elements, and will leave an almost impossible to remove residue if left in the elements too long. 3M manufactures several types of tape that are specifically designed for outside use and will not degrade or leave a sticky residue behind once you are finished with your teak project. Though a bit expensive, cleaning up after using cheap tape can be a life-altering experience, so spend the extra money for the right tape from the start.

swim ladders, handrails, decking and stock lumber that are manufactured from boards that are made of 100 percent recycled plastic.

According to the company, the material is UV stabilized and will not absorb water, paint, stains or oil. Plasteak is also resistant to gas, solvents, insects and waterfowl stains and also will not splinter, chip, crack, warp or rot.

Sounds perfect, right? I've looked at this material first hand, and although on close inspection it does not look exactly like the real thing, once it is installed, you (and most anyone else) will have a hard time telling the difference from the real thing with a casual glance. They have done a nice job with the manufacturing process of this material, and it is very easy to work with.

Alternatively, American Foreign Industries (AFI), an Asian import firm, also manufactures plastic teak replacement fittings (drink holders, handrails, cockpit tables, lumber and more), but only offers them in one flavor: white. You can find AFI's products in most major marine retailers and some smaller mariner supply shops.

For those of you with worn teak decks, Tek-Dek manufactures a high-tech material specifically designed to replace worn tongue-and-groove teak deck planking. UV stabilized and extremely easy to work with, Tek-dek comes in easily installed strips, which are adhered to the deck with Sika-Flex marine adhesive. It even comes with the traditional black caulk seam between the strips to give it an almost indiscernible appearance from a real teak-planked deck.

Making the Choice

Confused? No need to be. What you really need to do is ask yourself how much time you are willing to spend maintaining the teak on your boat, and then pick the appropriate product to meet your needs. If you're tired of sanding and applying protective coatings, maybe a plastic replacement is right for you. If the natural look of teak simply tugs at your nautical heart strings, pick a coating, properly prep your teak and go for it. I've personally used all of the products mentioned in this article and experienced good results with all of them and I'm sure you will, too. Good luck!