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DECKED OUT

MODERN LANDSCAPE DECKS CAN BE CONSTRUCTED TO SUIT A RANGE OF APPLICATIONS IN CONTEMPORARY LANDSCAPES. BECAUSE OF THE OUTSIDE LIFESTYLE ENJOYED BY MANY AUSTRALIANS, DECKS HAVE BECOME A SYNONYMOUS PART OF THE LANDSCAPE CONSTRUCTION INDUSTRY.

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Decks have significant commercial and residential applications forming an integral part of the way people interact with the landscape. The functionality and design of decks is virtually unlimited in their application offering an ideal surface for entertaining, taking advantage of site features and forming a smooth transition between the indoor and external environment; blurring the lines between the two areas.

Investing in a deck is a decision not taken lightly by clients as the financial outlay can be considerable, particularly when design and site constraints are factored into construction. Deck construction requires a decent set of plans, preferably engineer approved to the appropriate building codes and with the required council development application approvals in place.

Tools of the Trade

For contractors specialising in deck construction, the range of tools required to complete the installation of decks will vary according to the degree of complexity of the design and the materials chosen for construction. With any construction, particularly timber, quality hand tools will pay dividends on the job. The old adage, "you get what you pay for" rings true when purchasing quality tools and equipment for any type of trade. It is false economy to compromise on quality in order to save a few dollars in the short term as equipment failure on the job can result in significant downtime and additional expense.

The basic tool kit for wooden deck construction would consist of the following:

PRODUCT	PRICE RANGE
Power Drill	$50-$500
Set of Drill Guides (Jigs)	$10-$70
Nail Gun	$100-$550
Air Compressor (for Pneumatic Power Tools Only)	$150-$600
Circular Saw	$49-$300
Mitre Saw	$200-$800
Hand Saw	$15-$50
Claw Hammer	$8-$300
Drill Bit Sets/Drivers	$10-$100

The cost of equipment listed in the above table will vary depending on brand, model and supplier. One thing is certain though – if you want tools and equipment to last the distance, do not compromise on quality.

Fastening Systems

There are many variations on fastening systems for deck construction. Traditionally, decking boards are fixed with galvanised nails, particularly for outdoor applications where mild steel nails will corrode, compromising the integrity of the installation. Other options for fixing decking boards include galvanised hex drive screws which is a more expensive option than nails but less prone to failure through expansion and contraction of decking materials over time. There are also a number of hidden fixing systems available on the market that provide a deck finish with no ugly fixing components visible on the surface, giving a blemish-free finish. Installing deck fasteners is relatively simple and they provide good engineering qualities in holding decking timbers in place and provide for automatic gap spacing. Hidden decking fasteners provide a similar finish to secret nailing used on internal timber floors and are becoming increasingly popular with decking installations. Decking fasteners are also available in colours that blend into your choice of wood, PVC, or composite decking material.

A jig system can also be used for precise drill holes to guide hex decking screws or for nailing. There are a number of commercially available jig guides to suit a variety of applications in decking board installation. Jigs can help provide complete control over each joint and precision angles for optimal installation of fasteners.

Correct spacing of decking boards can be achieved with the use of spacers often referred to as decking widgets. There are products now available that provide multiple spacing options to allow for up to five lengths of decking boards to be laid at once with even spacing. They are available for 70mm and 90mm decking boards with 5mm pegs to ensure spacing of boards complies with Australian Standards.

Nail Guns

When it comes to nailing decking timbers the use of nail guns – gas propelled or pneumatic air guns – will provide the greatest efficiency. The advantages of nail guns over the traditional claw hammer are obvious. Large volumes of nails can be installed consistently and accurately in a short timeframe when using nail guns. The two common types of nail guns are pneumatic and cordless. As with any

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power tool each has its advantages and disadvantages.

Pneumatic guns can deliver nails at a rapid rate but with advances in technology the cordless types can deliver nails at similar rates. Cordless guns require cleaning more regularly and the cost of replacing gas canisters on a regular basis needs weighing up over the initial outlay of an air compressor for pneumatic types. There are of course other characteristics of each type of gun that will influence your purchasing decision. The type of gun decided upon should be based on its performance merits and the long-term application of its use in your business activities.

Pneumatic nail guns: these require a constant supply of compressed air supplied by a compressor. Nail guns have specific pressure requirements measured in pounds per square inch (psi) and air volumes measured in cubic feet per minute (cfm) for optimum operation and this will vary depending on the manufacturer. Ensure that the compressor meets the psi and cfm ratio requirements of the nail gun or performance will be compromised.

One disadvantage with pneumatic nail guns is the restriction of having the gun attached to a hose. Aside from the potential work health and safety hazards hoses pose on construction sites, nail gun hoses also need to be of the correct size and length to ensure efficacy. Hoses that are too long or the wrong size will decrease air flow and result in poor performance of the gun.

Cordless: cordless nail guns provide a greater degree of flexibility in applications as the operator is not hindered by hoses. The power source for cordless guns comes from a flammable gas contained within a disposable canister. Cordless guns have the distinct advantage of no hose being dragged around the worksite, reducing the risk of WHS hazards. This is an important consideration when a number of workers may be engaged in the construction.

There will be those situations where a nail gun is just not going to cut it. Hard-to-reach areas may require a more traditional approach to fixing timbers with the use of a hammer. Claw hammers are the obvious choice for decking and most other timber construction jobs. As with all tools, they will vary in price and quality from cheap wooden or steel-handled types to mid-priced fibreglass models. For those who can afford it, lightweight titanium models are at the extreme end of the price range.

Power Drills

When it comes to timber construction a power drill is a must for drilling guide holes and for driving decking screws. Power drills need to be able to take the tough punishment associated with deck construction. Cordless drills are the most popular for landscape construction and are powered by rechargeable batteries. They are available in a range of voltages including 9.6, 12, 14.4, 18 and 24-volt versions. For the tradie, a drill in the range of 18V to 24V should provide the torque required for most applications. Primary consideration should be given to the duration of charge the batteries will hold as well as providing the level of power required for the construction at hand. Even though rapid charge batteries are available, it is always a good idea to have a spare battery pack on charge so they can be swapped eliminating downtime. Gearing and chuck size is another point to consider with some models offering up to 13mm chucks and multiple gearing options.

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Mitre Saws

Mitre saws make short work of cutting timbers and can do so with a high degree of accuracy. They are much faster and less tiring to use than a circular saw. Mounted on a stand the mitre saw becomes a valuable tool for any worksite, readily relocatable with ease.

For versatility purchase a compound mitre saw with a bevel and slide which gives greater degree of precision cuts. Saws are available in a range of blade diameters with 305mm being a better option to tackle both small and large jobs with ease.

Circular Saws

Another useful tool in the landscape contractor's arsenal, circular saws are available as corded or cordless. The corded types will provide even distribution of power to the blade and are probably the better option if a power outlet is available. Blade sizes of 160mm to 235mm to suit a range of applications are available with the 185mm being the most widely used and popular on the market. There are saws with options such as laser guides but there have been reports of these being inaccurate, particularly in the cheaper models. As with all power tools it is a case of doing your research and buying the best you can afford.

The Bottom Line

When it comes to timber construction in landscapes such as decks, the choice of one brand of power tool over another often comes down to personal preference. Prices in today's market are highly competitive and just because one brand may be cheaper than another, is not necessarily a reflection on the quality of the product. Do your homework before making any initial outlay on tools and equipment and you could make some significant savings without compromising on quality. So deck your tool kit out with the best your money can buy. LC