



CHS Custom Decks & Design Outlines Material Guidance After Ash Loss

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CHS Custom Decks & Design has begun factoring canopy loss into how it advises property owners on decking material selection, as emerald ash borer removals leave residential yards exposed to direct sun for the first time in decades. The insect was first confirmed in Dakota County in 2014 and has since spread across much of Minnesota. Properties that sat under mature shade are now open to full sun, which changes how a deck surface behaves across its service life and how the surrounding space is used.

According to the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources, Minnesota holds one of the largest ash populations in the country, with close to one billion ash trees across its cities and forests. Native ash have no resistance to the insect, which kills trees ranging from young saplings to mature specimens. State guidance directs owners of untreated trees toward removal by a professional rather than waiting, since declining ash becomes brittle and hazardous to cut once the canopy has thinned.

The result on the ground is that removals are concentrated rather than gradual. A neighborhood that lost

several boulevard trees in the same season can look substantially different by the following summer. For property owners, the change arrives faster than the landscape can replace it, since a replacement tree needs years before it provides comparable shade.

CHS Custom Decks & Design has identified a recurring gap in how property owners approach material selection after tree loss. Buyers commonly evaluate decking products under the conditions in front of them, without accounting for how a newly opened yard will behave over the next twenty years. A board that performs well under intermittent shade can behave differently under sustained southern exposure across a full Minnesota summer.

"A homeowner loses a tree in one afternoon and the yard is a different place," said Chuck Saleen, Co-Owner of CHS Custom Decks & Design. "We are asking people to look at where the sun will actually fall next July, not where it falls today, because that is the condition the deck has to live in."

Surface temperature is the variable that shifts most noticeably. Board color, the composition of the material and the properties of the protective outer layer all influence how warm a deck surface becomes under direct sun. Where a mature canopy previously moderated that condition for several hours a day, the differences between products carry more weight in the decision. The same applies to resistance to ultraviolet exposure, which becomes more consequential on a surface that sits in uninterrupted light through the longest days of the year.

The company works across composite, PVC and wood decking, which allows material recommendations to be matched to the exposure conditions of a specific property rather than applied uniformly. Wood takes a finish that has to be renewed on a schedule, and that schedule can shorten once a surface is fully exposed. Composite and PVC set aside the finishing question but differ from one another in composition, which is where exposure conditions enter the comparison.

Existing decks are affected as well as new ones. A structure built under shade may show accelerated fading, surface wear or movement once the tree above it is gone, and the change often becomes visible within a season or two. The company performs deck inspections and handles resurfacing and upgrade work, which in many cases addresses the surface and railing while the existing frame remains sound.

Shade has also become a design question rather than an assumption. Property owners who previously had no reason to consider built shade are now looking at pergolas, louvered pergolas, gazebos and covered porches to restore usable conditions on a deck or patio that has become uncomfortable during afternoon hours. Where a tree once did that work, a structure now has to be planned for it, and the decision is easier to make while a deck is being designed than afterward.

"The material question and the shade question are the same question now," Saleen said. "If a yard has lost its canopy, that belongs in the conversation before anyone picks a board or decides where the deck goes."

The Minnesota Department of Natural Resources has described the trajectory of emerald ash borer as leading toward the functional extinction of the state's native ash species. For property owners across the metropolitan counties under state quarantine, the change in yard conditions is already underway rather than a future prospect, and it is reshaping how outdoor spaces are planned across the region.

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CHS Custom Decks & Design

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