

Dr.Decks Reports Shift Toward Shoulder-Season Outdoor Living Design

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Dr.Decks, a custom deck and outdoor living contractor founded in 1991, has reported a shift in how property owners across the South Puget Sound are prioritizing outdoor living projects, following a summer in which regional air quality agencies issued repeated advisories across western Washington.

The Puget Sound Clean Air Agency, together with the public health agencies of King, Kitsap, Pierce and Snohomish counties, issued a wildfire smoke alert for the region on August 3, 2026. Air quality readings that week were recorded as unhealthy across a corridor that included Tacoma and Olympia, with the greatest impacts reported across the South Sound and foothill communities. A heat advisory was in effect concurrently, and the alert was subsequently extended and expanded to additional counties before conditions cleared later in the week.

The Washington Smoke Blog, a partnership between state, county, federal and tribal agencies, has described 2026 as on pace to be among the more significant wildfire seasons across the region in recent history, noting that smoke events were likely to be a recurring theme through the summer months. The same agencies reported that a shift to onshore flow later in the week brought cooler and cleaner air back into the Puget Sound basin.

For contractors who design outdoor space, the practical consequence is a question of timing rather than construction. Peak summer has historically been treated as the season a deck or patio is built for, and design conventions across the industry have followed that assumption for decades.

"August used to be the month everyone planned around," said Jason Russell, Owner of Dr.Decks. "Now the conversations we have are about May and June, and about September and October. Those months have become more dependable than the middle of summer, and that changes what a structure needs to do."

Shoulder-season use places different demands on a design than midsummer use. Spring and autumn in the region bring sustained rain, cooler evenings and a lower sun angle, conditions that favour overhead structure and closer consideration of how a space is oriented on the property. Dr.Decks designs pergolas, louvered pergolas, cabanas and covered porches, and reports that inquiries have moved toward structures that include an overhead element rather than fully open platforms.

Orientation has become a more frequent subject during the design phase. Which direction a space faces determines when it receives direct sun and when it falls into shade, and the answer changes considerably between early spring and late autumn as the sun tracks lower across the sky. A structure positioned for midday summer use may perform differently in the months on either side of the peak season.

"A space that works beautifully at noon in July can be unusable at five in the afternoon in October," Russell said. "That is a design question, and it is much cheaper to answer on a screen than after the posts are set."

Rainfall patterns reinforce the same point. The South Puget Sound receives the majority of its precipitation between autumn and early spring, which historically pushed outdoor living use into a narrow midsummer window. Structures that address rain rather than only sun extend the calendar in both directions, and that consideration has moved earlier in the planning process for a growing share of projects.

Evening use has also entered the conversation more often. Daylight contracts quickly through September and October in the northern latitudes, and the hours a space remains usable after dark depend on decisions made during design rather than adjustments made afterward. Where and how a space is lit is more consequential than the number of fixtures installed.

The company incorporates 3D design modeling into its planning process, allowing property owners to review how a proposed structure sits on the site and how it relates to the house and the surrounding grade before construction begins. Layout, elevation and orientation are examined at that stage, when changes remain straightforward to make.

Dr.Decks makes no claim that outdoor structures alter air quality. During periods when regional agencies advise limiting time outdoors, the company notes that public health guidance issued by those agencies should be followed regardless of the type of structure involved. Current air quality forecasts for the region are published by the Puget Sound Clean Air Agency, and smoke guidance is maintained by the Washington State Department of Health.

Permits for outdoor structures in the area are obtained through Pierce County or the City of Tacoma depending on the property, and the company handles permit acquisition as part of its process.

Dr.Decks is a family-owned deck and outdoor living contractor founded in 1991 by Jason Russell, serving Tacoma and the surrounding South Puget Sound region. The company designs and builds custom decks, porches, pergolas, cabanas and outdoor living structures, and is known for shaping composite and PVC boards into curves through a process called deck board bending.

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