



This is Marshall Black, a mastermind carpenter and the new star of the Cottage Life channel's *Lake Docks & Decks*



THAT'S ONE **HECK** OF A DECK

By Martin Zibauer Photography Liam Mogan

And **this** is the best deck he's ever built—a sturdy cedar work of art, full of clever design tricks for enjoying outdoor space. Climb inside the mind of a deck genius

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Marshall Black is heading to an island he knows well, threading his custom-built contractor boat through the channels scraped into the edge of Georgian Bay, southwest of Parry Sound, Ont. It's been five years since he built a wrap-around, multi-level deck for the only cottage on two-acre Crouse Island, and some things have changed. For one, he's now trailing a TV crew, shooting the next season of *Lake Docks & Decks*. The crew is filming Marshall and fellow contractor Simon Hirsh on builds all over cottage country.

On screen and off, Marshall is not the typical gonzo TV builder; there's no alpha-male peacocking for the camera or gimmicky catchphrases. Instead, the lean, tanned 49-year-old father of two is calm, thoughtful, and deliberate—and a good listener to his building crew and his clients. Even though he's on Crouse Island because owner Stephen Smith and his family need a new dock, Marshall can't help but make a return visit up the hill to check on the deck. "This deck means a lot to me," he says. "It means a lot to the family."

The deck passes inspection. Its cedar top has weathered, as it should, to a soft, foggy grey, but there's little else that has aged. The pressure-treated wood that Marshall used for the substructure will last for decades, and "there's so much good airflow here nothing else will rot either." Even in the corner details, where Marshall has mitred the deck boards, picture-frame style, any aging is only cosmetic. Mitred joints are notorious for opening up as wood shrinks over time, but these are still tight. He explains that the only real secret is taking care to get the details right: measure and cut the

THESE ARE THE TERMS



1

To build (or have your contractor build) a deck as beautiful as the ones that Marshall Black makes for his clients, you have to know what to ask for. — Braden Alexander



2

1 On the top railing, a scarf joint connects the two pieces. Usually reserved for interior trim, this method hides the joint and is a more elegant alternative to the typical butt joint. The secondary railings a few inches below fit nicely into **dadoes** cut into the sides of the post, adding both strength and style.



3

and are grouted into concrete footings or directly into the bedrock. "Those are drilled right into Canada," says Marshall. "They ain't moving."

3 Marshall hides screws on top of the railings with **wood plugs** glued in, which help to prevent water from getting into the wood and causing rot.



4

2 The posts sit in **galvanized saddles**, which resist rust

4 Marshall includes a **breadboard end** at the top of the stairs—one final piece running perpendicular to the decking. Many builders leave this out, but including it adds polish.



PRO TIP

Glass panels on the front railing will preserve the view. Traditional balusters on the side railings will ensure the breeze keeps things cool.

At this Georgian Bay cabin, the deck takes up more square footage than the modest cabin does. According to Marshall, that's exactly as it should be. "You sleep in the cottage. You grab your beer from the cottage," he says. "But you live out on the deck."



PRO TIP
You're not limited to a rectangle. Design the shape of your deck to take full advantage of the best view.

All in, this deck cost about \$65,000 and took nearly six weeks for three people to build, including demo of the old one. Marshall says the steep price tag was largely due to building with cedar and the island location, 25 minutes from the marina.

PRO TIP
Instead of clearing trees to make room for your deck, just build around them and incorporate a bit of forest as a standout design feature (and built-in umbrellas).

THIS IS HOW YOU MAKE IT LAST

Once you've got the deck of your dreams, you have to put in a little work to make it last for your lifetime. Here's a handy guide to keeping any deck looking dreamy.

"When it comes to deck maintenance, the biggest thing is keeping it clean," says Chad Johnson with A.C.T. Home Services in Wetaskiwin, Alta. In the fall, you can get away with just sweeping off debris that traps moisture against the wood, promoting rot. Be sure to clean in between the deck boards too. In the spring, it's a good idea to do a deep clean to combat rot. Cottage Life's deck genius, Wayne Lennox, uses a pressure washer (no more than 1,200 PSI) with a surface-cleaning attachment to scrub his untreated wood deck. He also uses a cleaning agent called Activox (\$28 at Home Depot) to help lift the grime. Tim Page, the owner of Tim's Cottage Care in Port Sydney, Ont., says a mix of water, vinegar, and baking soda will work just as well.

For decks treated with stain or sealer, Johnson says that pressure washers can sometimes remove the treatment, so he recommends using a garden hose and a stiff-bristled broom.

Once your deck is clean, inspect it. Hammer in any loose nails (and bolster with a screw or two) and replace rotten boards—the ones that are cracking, feel spongy, or pull up at the corners. "Make sure you're not wasting your time staining a board that's rotten," says Johnson.

Then it's time to decide whether it needs stain or sealant. Decks made from cedar, such as the Smiths' deck, or pressure-treated wood don't require finishing. Left untreated, they'll age to a soft grey over time—and as long as they're well ventilated, not too shady, and built to drain water properly, they'll last a long time too.

Using a sealant will help wood decks maintain their natural colour. A stain will alter the colour and provide more UV protection. Both of these, however,

need to be revived regularly. Some stains and sealers only need to be reapplied every few years. To check, Tim Page recommends the sprinkle test: splash a bit of water onto your deck. If it beads, your stain is still good. If it absorbs into the wood, it's time to re-treat it. Decks 10 years or older often need their stain or sealers replaced once per year.

Start by sanding off the old layer of preservative—use a sanding pole or rent a floor sander to save your back. Once sanded, you can reapply the stain or sealant. It's best to do this in warm, dry weather, and it's a good idea to always keep a wet edge of stain, otherwise you run the risk of overlapping and creating darker streaks. "You want to finish the job the same day you start it," says Page. Apply as many coats as the instructions on the label dictate, with the appropriate amount of time to dry and cure in between—usually just an hour or so with most water-based stains and sealers.—B.A.

mitre carefully, then test-fit and tweak the angle as needed, even if you just have to shave off half a degree. Marshall likes to squeeze a bead of construction adhesive on the cut ends and install a screw coming in from each side of the joint.

There was another deck here five years ago—a simple, six-foot-deep strip across the cottage front—but it wasn't holding up. Literally. "Over time, some of its posts needed to be shored up," Stephen says. "I did what I could, but it had to be replaced." A friend had recommended Marshall to Stephen and his wife, Cathy MacNiven, and the three of them spent an afternoon on the old deck, making plans for a new one.

"He had ideas; she had ideas. We mostly went with hers," says Marshall, laughing. But all agreed that the wood railing of the old deck had to go; it was mucking up the view from the cottage looking out to island upon overlapping island. Especially the view a short distance across the water to one small island that is roughly the same, elliptical shape as Crouse and roughly parallel to it. To anyone else, Crouse's little sister is insignificant, but for these cottagers, it's exactly where the summer sun sets.

Could they lower the deck, suggested Cathy and Stephen, with steps leading directly down from the cottage's sliding patio doors? Marshall didn't like the idea. "Looks awkward," he told them bluntly, and it would be difficult to open the doors, especially if they were carrying gear or groceries. Instead, he suggested they have a small upper deck—"a buffer"—at cottage-floor level, with three steps down to a larger lower deck. "Two or three steps is perfect for sitting," he says. "The steps become bleachers, especially for a big group." And two or three shallow steps across the width of the deck doesn't need a handrail to meet code; more than three will make visitors and building inspectors nervous.

Briefing over, Marshall didn't start building. Yet. "I like to sit for a while and scratch my goatee," he says, "and think, What's the opportunity here?" One opportunity soon came out of Stephen and Cathy's request to preserve two

slow-growing pine trees in front of the old deck. Marshall didn't just accommodate them, like unwelcome guests. He used them as the organizing principle for the layout of the new deck: one marks the bottom edge of the bleacher steps; the other, like a whimsical postmodern column, defines the corner of the upper level. This corner would become the deck's most significant feature, though Marshall didn't know that when he was sitting and scratching.

A tiered deck would preserve the view from the cottage, but it wouldn't give any special prominence to sunset views over Crouse's Mini-Me island. The couple wanted a little drama, so Marshall put the island on stage. He angled a corner of the deck to match the north-by-northeast orientation of the two islands, creating a balcony seat for nature's daily curtain call. And had Marshall built a standard wood railing (with code-compliant balusters no more than 100 mm apart), there would still have been an obstruction to anyone sitting on the lower deck. One option: an all-glass railing (or one with a combination of glass and metal). Such a system would be easy to install, but "unless it's an uber-modern cottage, it doesn't look right," he says. {Continued on page 96}



THOSE GUYS ON TV

Lake Docks & Decks premieres on the Cottage Life channel on Thursday, March 8, at 9 p.m. EST and PST. This season includes four episodes following Marshall's deck- and dock-building adventures in cottage country, as well as four with his co-host Simon Hirsch. Watch as both contractors transform dilapidated decks and rotting docks into jaw-dropping leisure spaces for Canadian cottagers.

Marshall uses a technique called "easing" to round the edges of the hole for the tree (opposite). He used 45° braces for the posts (this page) for extra side-to-side support for such a big structure. The posts and decking are cedar, but the beams and joists are pressure-treated pine.

PRO TIP
Use 6x6s instead of the minimum-required 4x4s for the posts and your deck won't end up looking like "a potato on toothpicks."



THAT'S ONE HECK OF A DECK

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A better solution, in his opinion, mixes glass and wood: tempered glass panels slotted into grooves in the wooden posts. Marshall cut the grooves with $\frac{1}{8}$ " extra space on all sides so seasonal expansion and contraction wouldn't shatter the glass. He also squeezed a bead of clear caulking into the channel; it lubricates the panels as they slide in from the top and fixes them so they don't rattle in the Georgian Bay wind. Now, the custom-built railing keeps sightlines clear out to the islands.

But glass on all sides of a deck can block airflow, Marshall says, and can make the deck uncomfortably hot in summer. "You're creating an Easy-Bake Oven." On the sides of the deck, the wood balusters and rails are more like a typical deck build, but his craftsmanship is not. The bottom rails fit tightly into dados cut into the posts, and the top rails meet each other in almost invisible scarf joints, not the usual, quick-and-dirty butt joints. And by stacking the pair of top rails, with a space that falls roughly at eye level for anyone seated on the deck, Marshall left the side views relatively unencumbered.

Marshall can't hang out for long to check up on the five-year-old deck; he has a dock to build. The deck appears briefly in *Lake Docks & Decks*, but the episode's main focus is the new dock. As he did with the deck, Marshall tweaks his plans for the dock on the fly, adjusting angles as he goes and adding details to integrate it into the landscape. For example, where the boards abut an onshore rock outcrop, Marshall scribes the wood to fit tightly. Scribing is a technique of marking and cutting to match an irregular shape; it's time-consuming, so many builders approximate the obstacle's shape, smoothing out the bumps and leaving gaps where convenient. Marshall, though, takes pleasure in the precise—even obsessive—tracing of the rock's ins and outs. "I frame as close to the rock as I can, so the boards are supported. Then I work board by board." He marks and cuts a board, holds it in place, checks and rechecks it—finessing, adjusting, sanding, maybe

redoing, "until it's perfect." A final round-over of the cut edge with a router makes the wood look almost as old as the rock and equally as established. As he likes to say, "It doesn't cost money to do something cool."

Marshall has had a long association with television, though much of it was behind the scenes. He used to work in prop building for children's television. "Remember *The Big Comfy Couch*?" he asks. "I built those couches. Fourteen feet wide and seven feet high, with trap doors for puppeteers and Loonette." With no off-the-shelf plans for oversized furniture, he learned to improvise.

When he moved to cottage country almost 15 years ago, he realized that he had other skills that would be useful for a contractor. A prop builder pays attention to how people interact with their environments. For each prop, "you have to ask, 'What's the best material? Does it need to be light, so it can be moved? How strong does it need to be?'" A prop builder thinks visually, anticipating what the camera will see, and Marshall wants cottagers, especially DIYers, to approach their own projects this way. "If you can see it, it should look nice," is his basic rule. Exposed footings should be squared up, boxed in, or covered in some way. When support beams are visible, he suggests tapering the ends at 45 degrees. If your cottage has a concrete foundation, Marshall wants you to clad it in stone or wood. The same applies to deck supports: instead of the usual 4x4s that are strong enough to satisfy code but look insipid, Marshall prefers muscular 6x6s that leave no doubt about how much weight they can lift. That's what he used for the Crouse Island deck—because if you can see it, it should look nice.

"It got us from point A to point B," Stephen Smith says of the old deck, "but we didn't spend a lot of time on it." The family uses the new deck in all the ways typical cottagers do—for morning coffee, lunches, stargazing, hanging out. And, sometimes, for a bit of quiet thinking, Stephen says. "I don't meditate, but if I did, that'd be the spot to do it."

There's one unique finishing detail that Marshall added that encourages contemplation, memory, and maybe meditation, at the corner of the upper

deck punctuated by the tree. On the old deck, Stephen and Cathy called the side stairs their "Cocktail Corner"—a place to sit, with a little shade and a view of the setting sun. When the new deck was in the planning stage, Cathy wanted to hold on to that—a corner to relax, read, or enjoy an evening cocktail. A special place for her. Marshall designed the L-shaped upper deck with that in mind; the corner would use the tree as a signpost to draw people to it.

Cathy never saw the finished deck. She passed away in June of 2012, while the deck was under construction. "I wanted to do something memorable for the family," says Marshall. He knew that the corner she had intended for herself would now become an important place for everyone who remembered her; it would naturally become "Cathy's Corner." He took two 2x6s to a local sign maker who inscribed those words using a computer-controlled cutter. Marshall installed the boards, framing one of the deck's two pine trees. Cathy's Corner is a permanent tribute to the woman who inspired it. Marshall didn't tell Stephen what he was planning; it was just something he felt he should do.

"It was a complete surprise," Stephen says. "I was, frankly, staggered." It was a good surprise, but he seems reluctant to elaborate. He notes that Cathy's Corner has become a touchstone at the cottage, a place where everyone who visits can stop for a moment. Quietly, he adds, "It is a very special thing that he did."

Stephen was in for more surprises when he arrived by boat at the new dock. It was an authentic TV reveal—he hadn't yet seen much of the construction, and he reacted as if he was opening an Advent calendar of dock treats—the kayak rack and the launch ramp, hidden storage, a diving board, outdoor speakers, and more. Back when Stephen was interviewed for the opening sequence of the episode, the dock was an unstable, uneven set of mismatched platforms with exposed nails and rotten sills, not the handsome, functional dock he has now. "Marshall has created a space for my family and future generations of my family," Stephen says. "I picked the right man for the job." 🐾

Martin Zibauer is a former editor at Cottage Life and is plotting a new deck.