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More material choice and innovation help sustain demand for timber decking

Material choice and innovation together with the environmental credentials of wood are helping to consolidate the popularity of the timber deck as a feature of UK landscape design. Steve Young of the UK technical and advisory body, the Timber Decking Association (TDA), says any suggestion that decking is in decline is hugely misinformed: "The facts speak for themselves. 2011 is turning out to be an excellent year for the timber deck, demonstrating that demand for outdoor wood has held up well in the recent uncertain economic times." He adds that in 2010, the market had recovered to a value around £135 million – the equivalent of the market peak in 2007 - after dropping back to £128 million in 2008.

The major decking material suppliers that make up the manufacturing sector of the TDA are reporting growth in DeckMark quality assessed materials for the first four months of 2011 which, if maintained, would see the value of the market around £140 million at year end. Steve says that there are many factors at play in this performance. Continuing low interest rates, the good spring weather, the additional bank holiday for the Royal Wedding and the continuing trend to improve rather than move have all played a part but to a larger extent, so too has product innovation and the dramatic expansion of materials choice available to designers and consumers. Innovation like the emergence of enhanced grip boards and strength tested contemporary balustrade systems. Expansion of choice with more hardwood species from sustainable sources, the introduction of modified wood technology (heat or bio-chemical treatments) and the growing understanding of the benefits of using correctly treated pressure treated wood to make otherwise perishable softwoods highly durable are all having a positive impact on demand. Softwoods comprise 80% of all decking consumed in the UK. Pressure treated wood dominates this sector but choice is extended significantly by the availability of , naturally durable species like Cedar and modified woods like Accoya, Thermowood, Platowood and the hardwood look-a-likes, Kebony and Keywood. Hardwoods – temperate and tropical – have increased in popularity to around 17% of the market, particularly in the commercial sector where the hard wearing properties of more dense species come into their own – and new sustainable species like Lyptus are starting to emerge. The remaining 3% of the market is occupied by man-made materials – wood dust and plastic polymer composites and UPVC – a niche position that hasn't changed significantly since 2005.

The TDA estimates that in 2010 the market was split roughly 55% domestic and 45% commercial. "Decking remains popular" say the TDA "because people see the deck as an extension of their home and just like wooden floors inside the home, the timber deck is soft, kind and warm to bare feet more so than any other surface in the garden - which is exactly what you would want from an outdoor room".

In the commercial sector, the TDA says there has been strong growth in demand for "enhanced grip" deck boards. These are high quality plain or grooved (although increasingly the trend is for plain boards) pressure treated softwood or hardwood boards into which inert strips of anti-slip compound (normally a blend of bauxite dust and silicone) have been injected into preformed channels. TDA members are the major manufacturers of these added value boards and Steve says that the TDA requires manufacturing members have the boards independently assessed under a British Standard slip resistance test meet with HSE Slip Resistance ratings for floors with a low potential for slip in both wet and dry conditions. Products that pass these assessments are marketed under the

DeckMark Plus quality and performance scheme operated by the TDA. This is the same scheme that is used to assess modular balustrade systems for their load bearing capability – particularly those that will be installed as safety barriers as required by building regulations for structures more than 600mm in height.

Using quality materials is one thing but they have to be used correctly too. Workmanship can have a huge bearing on whether the deck or boardwalk meets its service life expectations and it is for this reason that all TDA registered design and installation contractors must submit to an annual assessment of their competence under the DeckMark quality scheme. “As the trend for more complex raised decks with enhanced load bearing capabilities continues the safety of those using the structure the principal concern” says Steve who adds that TDA has collaborated with leading new homes insurer NHBC to develop a code of practice capable of delivering structures with a 60 year service life.

Timber decks, boardwalks and associated landscape structures have become established as popular outdoor features and, as more emphasis is placed on wood as the low carbon and sustainable material of choice, the TDA says the use of wood outdoors is set to remain strong. When talking about the environmental credentials of wood, the TDA points out that wood is a natural material that sits in perfect harmony with nature. “The more we use wood the more is planted and the more our forests expand to be a store for carbon” says Steve who adds: “Wood is perfect as part of design strategies aimed at minimising the need for the frequent use of water or chemical top dressings. And when there is a downpour of rain the run-off goes through the gaps and into the ground – not into town drainage to exacerbate flooding risk”.

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The TDA is part of the Timber Decking & Cladding Association, a not for profit, technical and advisory body that exists to help professionals and consumers make the most of wood. It operates DeckMark, a quality scheme for products and for design and build contractors.

For more information see www.tda.org.uk

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