

Porch Stair Treads that look great and last forever

By Dan Miller

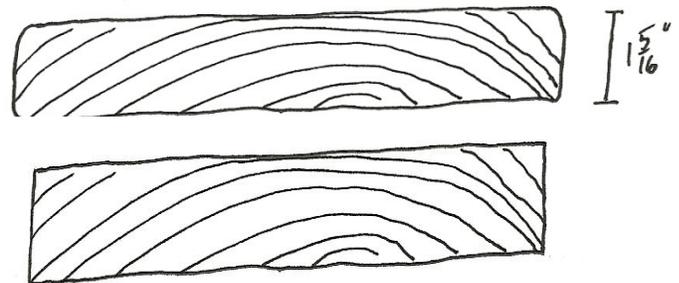
For 100 years on all but the largest homes, the old timers used what was called 5/4 X 12 (actual 1 1/8 X 11) fir stair tread for porch stairs. They were still readily available about 20 years ago but were expensive, and experience showed me that they were second-growth wood that rotted in a hurry. I do not believe they are available today for exterior use.

A few years ago, local contractor/carpenter Scott Savel came up with a brilliant way to make stair treads that last and look great. Since then he and I have made them for numerous houses.

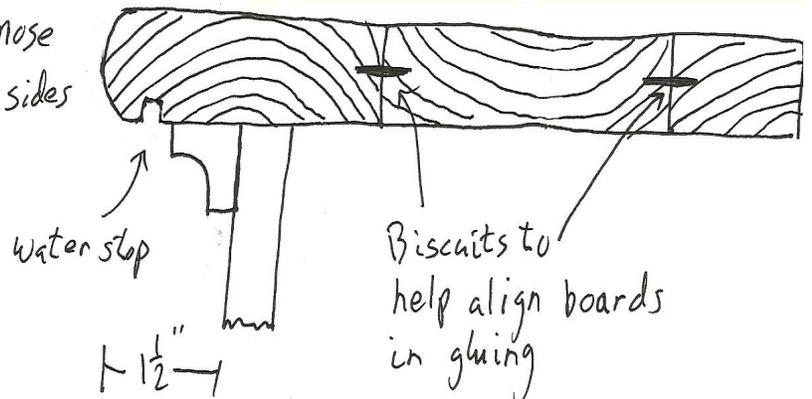
I use Scott's method to make the treads. The decking comes with rounded edges so both edges have to be ripped to make them square.

One board for each tread can have one edge left rounded as it will be routed more to make the bull-nosed edge.

Place the boards together so that the grain alternates to help prevent cupping. It helps to use biscuits to keep the boards aligned in gluing but it is not crucial. One of the problems with using treated lumber is that it has a high moisture content. I often put the boards in our sunny driveway for a day or two, flipping them numerous times so they don't cup. Even after that, they have a high moisture content – too high for normal glues. Any of the polyurethane glues like Gorilla Glue depend on moisture for curing so they are absolutely ideal for gluing up treated lumber. Use rubber gloves as the stuff leaves a black mark on your skin that takes days to come off.

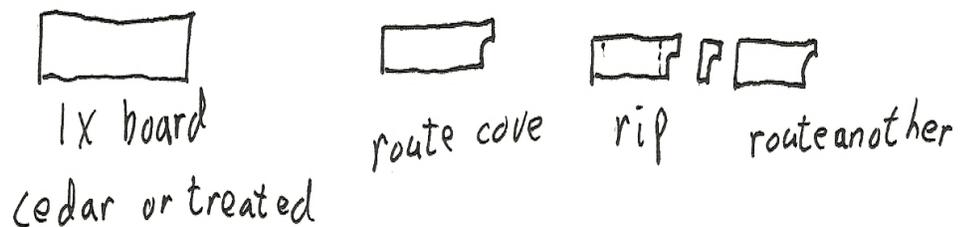


Bull nose
three sides



Trick for routing the cove

Rip the tread to final width and round over three sides to give a classic bull-nosed look. I rip a little water stop on the outside bottom edge so water



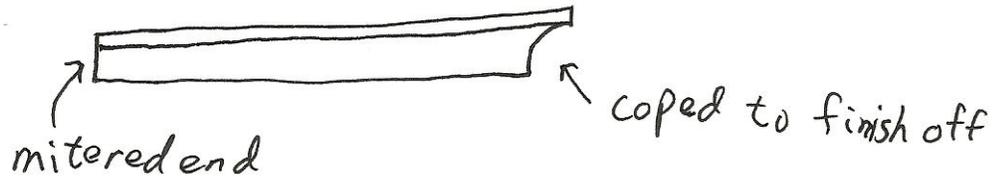
does not come around and rot the riser.

I use a router and scraps from the process to make a $\frac{3}{4}$ X $\frac{3}{4}$ cove molding for under the tread. It looks really classy and will not rot. If you use a typical store-bought cove molding, it will rot off in a matter of years. The short pieces of cove should be coped at the end to give a finished look.

Both sides of the board should be painted before installing. If one side is painted and the other is not, it allows moisture to come into the wood on one side making it warp. Do not use white house primer on the treads. Everybody makes this huge mistake. If you use white primer when the final coat starts to wear through a little bit, the white underneath sticks out like a sore thumb. Deck enamel does not stick well to house primer. House

primer is also not designed to walk on. It will not last. I have seen it fail time and time again. The treads should be painted with the same paint

that is going on the porch floor – a high quality paint designed for decks. Read the label and either thin it a little for the first coat or use it full strength.



Pre drill countersunk holes in the tread to fasten them with screws to the risers. Use lots of screws to encourage the boards to stay in place. Fill the holes with epoxy so they do not show.

Tips on materials

The new 5/4 cedar or treated decking is actually only 1 inch thick so it was not great for making authentic treads. Recently the big box stores have come out with what they are calling thick decking, still named 5/4 X 6 but it is actually 1 3/16 thick, which makes it ideal for an old-fashioned tread. The problem with typical treated decking is that it is full of knots, although they can be filled with epoxy so they do not show through the paint.

Elgin carpenter Mike Howell recently turned me on to a wonderful new product that is actually manufactured by Menard's. They call it 5/4 X 6 cedartone decking. They give it an orange color in treating it so it looks more like cedar than the green typical of treated lumber. The color is wacky, but it does not matter as they are going to be painted. It is wonderful in that they use #1 Southern Yellow pine to make the decking. There are very few or no knots at all yet they are very inexpensive. Wow!!! Take your time to go through the pile to find straight boards with the fewest knots. If one Menard's does not have a good selection, go to another.