

# Outdoor Wood Maintenance

— *Seasonal Checklist* —



A practical list you can use year after year. Tailored for Chicagoland weather and for decks, patios, pergolas, gazebos, fences, and more.

# FALL CHECKLIST

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**Best window: September - November before hard freeze**

- Clean, repair, and seal for winter**
  - Final wash with wood-safe cleaner and allow two dry days
  - Repeat the water bead test. Reseal if needed while temps are 50–80°F. Choose a moisture-repelling sealer designed for cooler, wetter months
    - **Craiger tip:** Fall sealing helps wood shed winter moisture.
- Fill small checks and cracks where water can sit**
  - **Tools:** Exterior wood filler or epoxy per product guidance
- Tighten all hardware, especially stair and gate connections**
- Inspect and clear ledger flashing, joist hangers, and post bases**
- Replace any remaining corroded fasteners with stainless or hot**

## SITE PREP

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- Clean gutters that drain toward decks or patios**
- Trim trees and shrubs back at least 12 inches from wood**
- Remove planters from deck surfaces or place on rolling caddies**
- Stage winter tools**
  - **Tools:** Plastic shovel, push broom, traction sand or calcium magnesium acetate
  - **Craiger tip:** Avoid rock salt on wood. Chlorides can degrade fibers and finishes.
- Store or cover furniture with breathable covers. Do not trap moisture**

# WINTER CHECKLIST

**Best window: December - February after snow events and during thaws**

- Protect without trapping moisture**
- Store small furniture indoors if possible**
- Use breathable covers on furniture left outdoors to prevent trapped moisture and mold**
- Remove snow promptly with a plastic shovel moving with the board direction**
- Avoid metal ice chisels**
- Do not place salt or chemical ice melt directly on wood**
- Ventilate covered areas to reduce condensation under tarps and canopies**
- Check pergola or gazebo canopies for snow load and brush off safely**
- Inspect after mid-winter thaws for ponding or ice dams and redirect runoff**



# SPRING CHECKLIST

**Best window: Late March - May after two dry days above 50°F**

## Clear and clean

- Remove leaves and debris from board gaps and corners
  - **Time:** 30–60 min per 250 sq ft
  - **Tools:** Leaf blower, soft brush, plastic putty knife
  - **Craiger tip:** Work with the board direction so you do not lift fibers.
- Rinse all wood surfaces with a garden hose
  - **Tools:** Hose with fan nozzle
  - **Craiger tip:** Use a pressure washer only on the lowest setting with a wide tip and keep the wand moving. Test a small inconspicuous area first and plan to reseal if the finish is lifted.
- Deep clean with a wood-safe cleaner (oxygenated)
  - **Tools:** Bucket, soft-bristle deck brush, cleaner per label
  - **Craiger tip:** Rinse thoroughly to remove residue that can block stain.
- Brighten grayed or tannin-streaked areas with an oxalic acid brightener
  - **Tools:** Brightener, pump sprayer
  - **Craiger tip:** Neutralize per label and let dry fully.

## Inspect and repair

- Probe for soft spots at posts, stair stringers, and board ends
  - **Tools:** Awl or screwdriver
  - **Craiger tip:** If the tool sinks in easily, schedule a repair.
- Tighten or replace loose fasteners with stainless or exterior-coated screws
  - **Tools:** Driver, exterior screws
  - **Craiger tip:** Replace corroded nails with screws for a stronger hold.
- Sand raised grain and splinters on treads and handrails

- **Tools:** 80–120 grit sandpaper or palm sander
- **Craiger tip:** Vacuum dust before finishing.
- Check flashing at the ledger board and around posts
  - **Craiger tip:** Water stains or rust trails often point to failures.

## Protect and finish

- Do the water bead test. If water darkens wood within 10 seconds, plan to seal
  - **Craiger tip:** Choose semi-transparent penetrating stain for softwoods. For hardwoods like ipe or teak, use a penetrating oil with UV blockers.
- Apply finish in thin coats when wood moisture is under 15 percent and no rain is forecast for 24–48 hours
  - **Tools:** Stain or sealer, quality brush, stain pad, drop cloths
  - **Craiger tip:** Brush ends and cut edges first. Two thin coats perform better than one heavy coat. Moderate temperatures and lower humidity help finishes cure evenly.

## Hardware, safety, and site

- Test railings, stair treads, and gates for movement
  - **Craiger tip:** Any wobble deserves attention before the heavy-use season.
- Lubricate hinges and latches with a dry lubricant
- Re-level pavers or stepping stones that meet wood edges
- Redirect downspouts and ensure at least 1 ft of vegetation clearance around wood
- Add furniture glides and felt pads to prevent scuffs

# SUMMER CHECKLIST

Best window: June - August during dry spells

## Keep finishes strong and surfaces cool

- Sweep weekly and rinse monthly to remove pollen and dust
  - **Craiger tip:** Grit acts like sandpaper under foot traffic.
- Add shade where possible to reduce UV load
  - **Tools:** Umbrellas, shade sails, pergola canopies
  - **Craiger tip:** Rotate furniture every two to four weeks to even sun exposure.
- Spot-clean spills immediately with mild soap and water
- Refresh oil-finished hardwoods with a light maintenance coat if wood looks dry. This allows the wood to breathe during humid months
  - **Craiger tip:** Skip this if your deck has a film

## MID-SEASON CHECK

- Inspect for insect activity, especially carpenter bees at soffits, rafters, and rail details
  - **Craiger tip:** Plug abandoned holes with exterior wood filler and touch up finish.
- Retighten high-traffic fasteners and check rail hardware
- Re-caulk small movement joints with exterior elastomeric sealant
- Verify irrigation does not spray wood daily
  - **Craiger tip:** Re-aim heads to reduce

## Furniture and fabrics

- Wash outdoor cushions and covers. Dry fully with airflow
- Apply fabric guard per label to repel water and stains
- Elevate furniture slightly to promote drainage after storms

## YEAR-ROUND QUICK TASKS

- Monthly five-minute walk-through. Look for loose boards, lifted fasteners, and finish wear
- Sweep high-traffic areas weekly
- Wipe spills immediately to avoid tannin stains
- Keep 1/4 inch gaps between deck boards clear for drainage
- Keep grill mats and heaters off bare wood. Use heat-safe pads
- Use wood oil or conditioner every few months, especially in dry climates
- Keep furniture elevated off damp ground; use outdoor-specific cushions and breathable covers to allow airflow
- Do a full seasonal inspection at the start of spring, summer, fall, and winter for cracking, fading, loose joints, and moisture damage

# WHEN TO CALL CRAIGER

Structural movement at posts, ledgers, stair stringers, or guardrails

Rot that extends deeper than 1 inch or spans structural members

Widespread finish failure, heavy checking, or cupping

You want to add shade, privacy, lighting, or a new custom feature

**(815) 479-9660**

## QUICK CALENDAR

Mar  
-  
Apr

Deep clean, repairs, spring sealing if needed

June

Mid-season hardware check, shade and fabric care

Sept  
-  
Oct

Final clean, seal, and site prep

All  
Winter

Gentle snow removal and moisture management

## MATERIALS & TOOLS REFERENCE

- **Cleaners**
  - Wood-safe oxygenated cleaner, oxalic acid brightener
- **Finishes**
  - Semi-transparent penetrating stain for softwoods
  - Penetrating oil with UV inhibitors for hardwoods
  - Waterborne acrylics for quick dry times in spring and fall
- **Fasteners and hardware**
  - Stainless steel 305 or 316, or hot-dip galvanized
  - Exterior-rated structural screws for ledgers and stringers
- **PPE**
  - Gloves, eye protection, dust mask, knee pads

## HARSH CLIMATE ADJUSTMENTS

- Use high-quality sealants and stains more frequently when exposure is extreme or weather is harsh. Adjust maintenance cycles accordingly
- Use custom-fit protective covers during the wettest months; pick breathable materials that do not trap moisture
- Place and orient furniture to minimize direct sun and prevailing weather exposure

## HARDWOOD VS SOFTWOOD CARE

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- Place and orient furniture to minimize direct sun and prevailing weather exposure