

Using Cyberspace To Change Your Living Space

(NAPSA)—Do-it-yourself (DIY) enthusiasts know to seek advice from friends, hardware store owners and television to learn how to make home improvements. But Web sites provide another option with even more customized designs and “how-to” advice.

The Internet is an increasingly important resource for the DIY builder, according to a report by the Pew Internet & American Life Project. The report found that 55 percent of adult Internet users look for DIY or how-to project information online.

In many cases, these homeowners add outdoor living spaces, of which decks are one of the most versatile outdoor additions, and, with guidance and knowledgeable searching, the Internet makes deck building the work of an index finger.

In one morning, a DIY enthusiast can research and design a custom project, read personal product reviews and watch instructional videos by professional builders.

Custom Design

Some home improvement DIY sites focus on specific projects, such as decks or outdoor kitchens, but the sites can also be expansive, covering every topic a DIY enthusiast can imagine.

For homeowners interested in using one of the most popular types of lumber for decks, Western Red Cedar Lumber Association's Web site hosts “Deck Designer” (www.cedar-decking.org/deck_designer). Users select and modify several deck shapes, customizing the design with railings, stairs and even additional levels. Once the deck is complete, users will receive a three-dimensional model of the design, lists of materials and DIY tips. Deck Designer also provides the nearest Western red cedar suppliers and allows the user to save the design.

Other sites include Remodeling Center (www.remodelingcenter.com), which has sections for



Online deck designer tools allow users to customize the size, features and even multiple levels of their decks.

remodeling all rooms of the house, including the outdoor living space. Each section of the Web site gives planning advice, product reviews and photo galleries of other people's projects.

Doityourself.com expands the DIY horizon even more by including advice and instructions for the garden and outdoors, painting and decorating, and even electrical and plumbing advice.

Check for the online DIY design sites with local building code requirements, such as the Western Red Cedar Lumber Association's Deck Designer, to ensure that the design meets specific codes for a geographic area to create virtual plans. So a DIY builder designing at home still has the backing of knowledgeable, expert guides.

Expert Advice

Some sites provide real-time interactive opportunities with expert builders and architects, and sites often include tips that will help the user avoid common mistakes.

For example, in addition to the Deck Designer tool, the Western Red Cedar Lumber Association's Web site (www.wrcla.org) features an interactive “Ask Mr. Cedar” function. Users can type a question to Mr. Cedar, a fourth-generation lumberman, and he responds

with the answers. The site even has instructional videos conducted by Mr. Cedar posted online (http://wrcla.org/specifications_and_publications/diy_videos/default.htm).

For detailed visual instructions, users can view one of the many online DIY videos that walk step by step through home-improvement projects, such as Mr. Cedar's videos, HGTV Video (www.hgtv.com/hgtv/video_guide) and Web sites of popular DIY television shows.

For example, Bob Vila's Web site (www.bobvila.com) contains instructional videos, clips from his show and a blog for DIY builders to discuss projects and favorite materials. The site also includes a feature to calculate quantity and cost of materials.

DIY 2.0

An aggregate site of informational articles is wikihow.com. It is an offshoot of the popular Wikipedia site, a user-generated encyclopedia that uses “wikis” to enable users to continually edit and modify articles. The wiki-How site contains over 35,000 articles on subjects ranging from home and garden to computers to relationships.

DIY users are forming new groups and communities daily to share with people who have similar interests. The HGTV site features a message board on which anyone can post questions, answers and home-improvement experiences. Similar online communities have formed on Web sites of home-improvement companies, as well as by independent DIY enthusiasts.

So go ahead, plug into the online home-improvement community before drawing, cutting or nailing. DIY enthusiasts who start by looking for a unique design may end up finding an online interactive community with which to share home-improvement interests and tips.