

# Decks that go the distance

The one thing better than being able to spend weekends and warm evenings relaxing on your deck is being able to do it year after year because you planned properly. **By Donyale Harrison**



*This Pentarch decking timber is repeated in the built-in seating and ceiling lining, and has ventilation gaps to keep it stable.*



**Above:** Leaving a hardwood deck to grey off naturally can have be a perfect option for relaxed outdoor spaces like this classic Queenslander.

Australians are spoiled for choice when it comes to creating our perfect outdoor retreats. The range of decking timbers alone is extensive: in the past few years this magazine has run stories on native timber boards from Pentarch, sustainable flooded gum from Mortim, Simmonds Lumber's imported and local ranges and Themory's heat-treated boards as well as recycled and sustainable options from Kennedy's Timbers, and ITI's choices of softwood, hardwood and composite boards. And that's before we've even touched on fastenings and coatings.

You would think the obvious conclusion is that we're experts at decks in this country. But, too often, builders and homeowners prioritise the wrong things when it comes installing their deck. Three elements need to work together to keep the client happy and the job long-lasting: the look, the budget and the right materials, and in some ways the last of these should govern the other two.

We spoke with Leon Travis, general manager sales and distribution at Pentarch Forestry about watchpoints for timber in decking and how to best use Pentarch's extensive offer, then with James Renshaw, head of marketing, and Jason Shedden, general manager, at connections specialist VUETRADE about how to make sure your deck lasts its full performance life.

“People start with a deck’s colour – the same way they choose their flooring timbers.”



**Above:** Durable spotted gum lasts near gardens

### ASKING THE RIGHT QUESTIONS

Leon Travis and his team at Pentarch Forestry supply for a wide range of customers, from decks and boardwalks at commercial venues to home builders.

“When they come to us, the idea at the front of their mind is colour,” he says.

“Usually they'll have done their homework and know if they want to maintain the deck with periodic oiling and so on to retain the colour or whether they're looking for timber that will naturally grey-off with minimal maintenance, and that decision will be made in conjunction with the style of their home and backyard, in exactly the same way people choose their flooring timbers. We have a comprehensive range and will be able to find the perfect match for them.”

Where it gets complex is in the second thing people want for their decks. “That's durability, which dovetails into design. And that's where the difficulties start,” Travis says.

Happily, those difficulties aren't an integral factor of the timber deck itself, rather, they're due to not enough expertise being brought to bear on the design and mostly occur in domestic builds where the homeowner has engaged a builder or carpenter.

“My experience is they're fully reliant on builder to provide them with all the necessary information,” says Travis, “and they're not >>

talking directly with us or with one of our stockists, who would completely understand the appropriate product for the application.”

In short, there is an important difference between a well-built deck and a well-built deck that’s right for its location.

Pentarch has multiple resources to help make sure everyone gets the right deck for their site. “Our installation guide – you can download it from the website – is comprehensive, and we encourage people to call us or our expert stockists,” Travis says.

“We try to give the most specific advice possible in response to the situation of their build, and that starts with questions like ‘How low to the ground will the decking structure be? Will it be beside the pool area or up against vegetation or garden beds? Are you in a BAL-rated area?’ All those sorts of questions will guide our advice.”

One of the most common issues is decking structures built low to the ground, in which cases Travis advises a narrow-profile decking plank.

“The biggest issue is with moisture. Timber is hygroscopic, so it absorbs moisture,” he says. “If your deck is on a flat block or beside a pool area, there’s every chance of drainage issues, which means water will pond under that deck. If you’ve used narrow boards, then the gaps between those boards should allow for enough airflow under the deck to dry that out. But if you’ve used wide boards, there are fewer gaps and therefore less air movement.

“If those boards aren’t properly sealed on the bottom and sides, that moisture will be absorbed and the planks will expand. If the gaps between the boards aren’t wide enough for the application, the planks can actually compress and cup.”

Pre-oiling, which Pentarch offers as a service, can help by giving the installers time before the boards start taking up moisture, but, Travis says, “it’s not a permanent solution. It’s only one coat. But it gives them a little bit of time post-installation to ensure that the deck is properly sealed.”

Wider planks come into their own in decks with more clearance, such as those on sloping blocks and in many regional locations. “In some of those areas we start looking at fire safety,” Travis says.

“There are regulations in the standard and may be additional requirements that each council will be across. In BAL 29 zones, we’re going to be recommending timbers with natural fire retardancy such as spotted gum, blackbutt, silver top ash... the species that carry high durability and are also naturally fire retardant.”

### GETTING THE RIGHT RESULTS

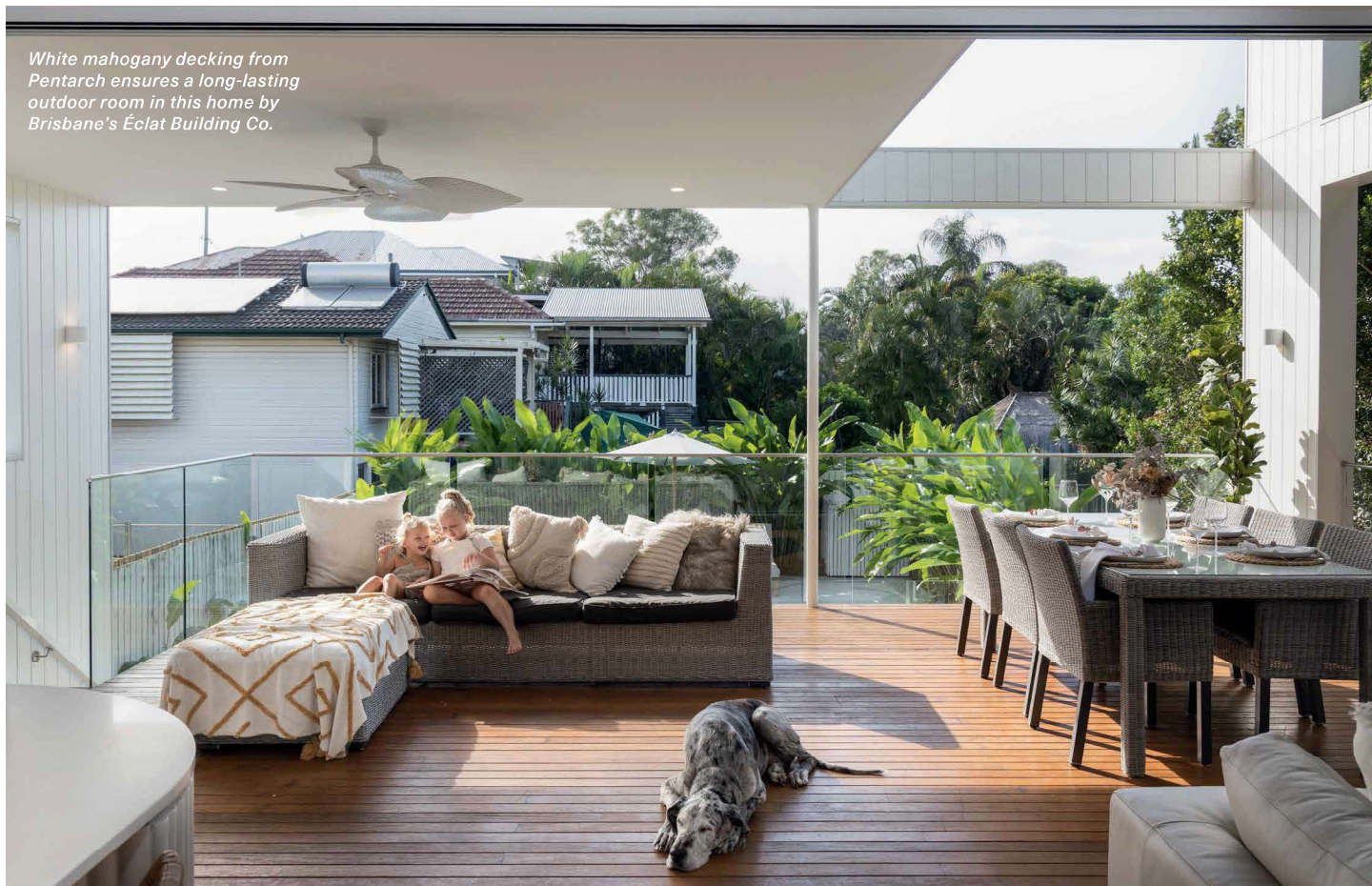
“A surprisingly regular question we get asked is ‘Why has our deck turned orange? Why does it have a horrible appearance?’” says Travis. “We have to find a nice way to say it’s because they’ve used an inappropriate product that they’ve picked up wherever. In good news, there’s a simple remedy.”

He advises sanding the deck to remove the discoloured surface then re-coating with a proper decking oil from a recommended brand (talk to your timber supplier about suitable coating and cleaning products.)

“This is another case of start with the experts,” Travis says.

“Timber merchants sell a lot of good quality products that will avoid those situations. >>

“For low decks, the gaps between narrow boards should allow for enough airflow under the deck to keep the underside dry.”



White mahogany decking from Pentarch ensures a long-lasting outdoor room in this home by Brisbane’s Éclat Building Co.

PHOTO: COURTESY PENTARCH FORESTRY/ÉCLAT BUILDING CO

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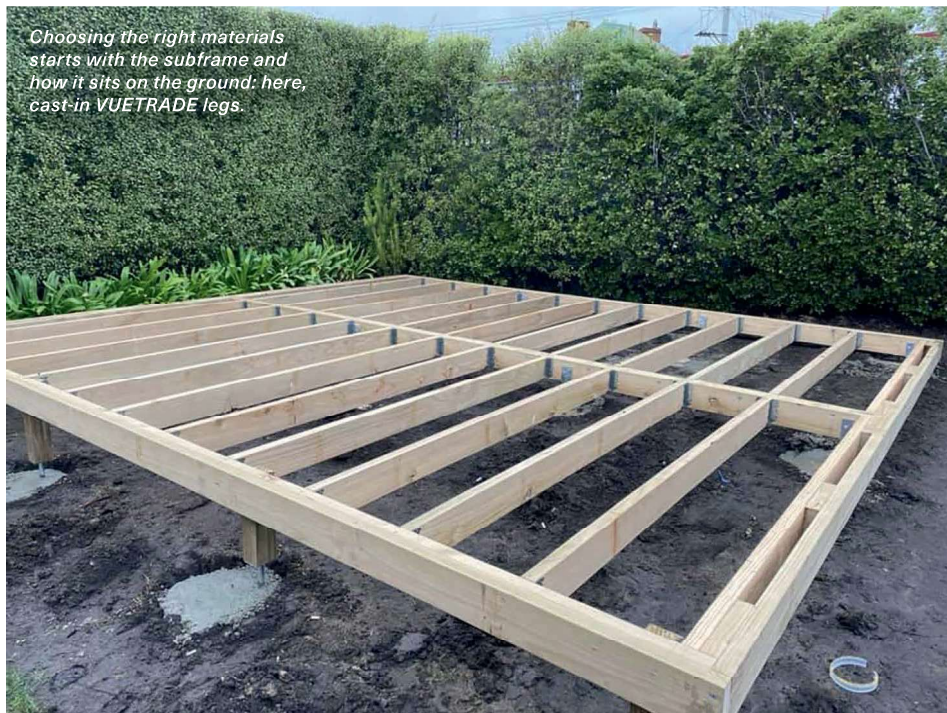
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DECKING





Choosing the right materials starts with the subframe and how it sits on the ground: here, cast-in VUETRADE legs.



Above: VUETRADE's T-Blade system conceals most of the steel, leaving timber the star of the show.

“Where a deck is located will determine whether it requires stainless steel.”

everything from installation to the product's performance in the deck.

“We also make a point in our installation instructions that pre-site handling of the product is key,” says Travis. “We spell it out: protect the boards against adverse weather; keep the wrapping on the pack; throw a tarp over it if you're not intending to start installing in the 24 hours after delivery; keep it dry: keep it off the ground.”

Travis emphasises talking with your timber supplier and reading the manufacturer's instructions on the correct type of fasteners to use, noting that much of the industry has moved ahead of the Australian standards.

“A deck is a big investment and you want long-term in-service life,” Travis says. “All the things that have traditionally guaranteed that still do: Australian-made timbers that are sustainably sourced, certified, regulated and durable. Good quality coatings if you're trying to maintain your deck's colour, and regular checks to see if maintenance is needed.”

“Above all, don't try and create a design that you know is unworkable. If it's low to the ground, readjust the look for narrow boards, as opposed to wider boards. And always make sure you've got good drainage.”

“If you follow all those steps, you'll have a really beautiful place to entertain and enjoy your downtime.”

Pentarch sources 95% of its hardwoods

through a contract with the NSW State Government. “There's been some misinformation about hardwood harvesting on Crown Land in the media recently,” says Travis, “but those forests are highly regulated. We've actually brought local politicians into our business, both out in the forests and at our plants, to see what really happens.”

“I'm pleased to say a lot of MPs are accepting our invitations and when they come to observe how it actually works, it changes the whole narrative and their point of view. Once people are educated about the realities, they can see how sustainable this industry is.”

### HOLDING IT TOGETHER

Part two of the decking materials question is, of course, the parts that hold it together. “There's a huge range of product – and then just as big a range of decks and locations out there,” says VUETRADE'S James Renshaw.

Like Pentarch, the VUETRADE team has a series of questions to direct its customers to the best options, starting with location.

“This is the vital one for us, because where a deck is located will determine whether it requires 316 stainless steel, or 304 or galvanised product,” says Renshaw.

“There are so many Australian homes near the coast and that equals salt, which will quickly corrode galvanised product. We've designed a map to help our customers understand the conditions where they are and what that means for their choices.”

VUETRADE's map (see page 31) divides coastal areas into R2, R3 and R4 durability classification regions. R4 is the highest classification, requiring 316 stainless steel for breaking surf environments close to the coast with high levels of salt in the air and wind. Also called ‘Severe Marine’ zones, these are areas where inappropriate materials will corrode rapidly, sometimes within months.

Sheltered coastal areas, such as very sheltered bay areas, salt water harbours and salt water river estuaries, may only require R3 materials made of 304 stainless steel, which is somewhat cheaper. The salt content in the air is lower and there is less onshore wind, however these areas are still considered Marine Environment zones.

Most other areas will be Standard, where galvanised steel will do the job, but Renshaw notes there are still some Standard locations that are unsuitable for galvanised product. “Anywhere there's a lot of water, even freshwater, requires specialised product. Saltwater pools are increasingly common and corrode just like surf. Chlorine pools are highly reactive, too,” he says.

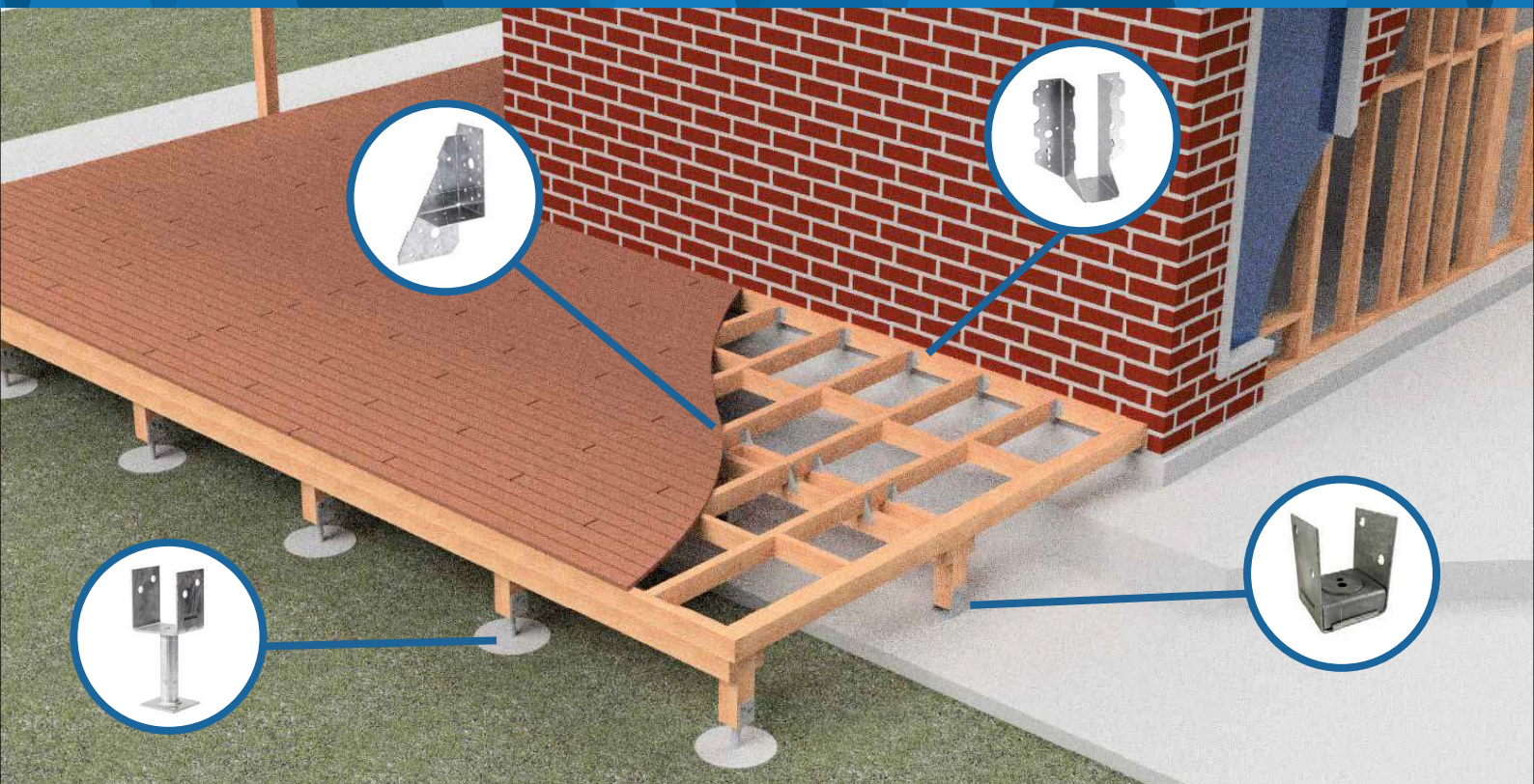
The team has made this information as accessible as possible, partly to educate builders and partly to educate the general

They occur when people hope to save money on a cheap coating product, but end up with discolouration or oxidation, which looks horrible. It peels and it turns orange and doesn't do the job. But it's easy to fix: sand back to the raw surface and re-coat with the recommended choice. For a small difference in product cost, there's a huge difference in the result, so you save overall.”

Care for Pentarch's decking timbers starts much earlier in their lifespan. They're dried in the same kilns as the brand's flooring products, to a 10-12% moisture target. This level of moisture helps to ensure the final product is dimensionally stable, which aids in

# DECK THIS OUT

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Above: This subtle VUETRADE connector provides all the strength needed without visually dominating.

public, who sometimes quibble over the cost difference between stainless and galvanised parts. Jason Shedden says, "We've got builders who are quoting in stainless steel and doing the right thing – no cutting corners – and their customer will go with a lower quote from a builder who's specified the gal product for a coastal zone.

"And we might have quoted that job on the stainless, too, but they choose to go with galvanised to get the job, then 18 months

later that job comes back again and you think, 'I remember that...' Now they're retrofitting with the stainless steel and they're paying to do the job twice. There are no builders who make money out of callbacks."

For some builders, there isn't a clear understanding that even away from the beach front, corrosion zones are important, but in other cases it comes down to cost. Renshaw says that some homeowners only look at the final cost figure, not the reasoning behind it.

"Getting the decision maker to understand the upfront benefits and the higher costs associated with that amount of retrofitting is where the problem lies," he says.

Shedden agrees, "In the very best case, where the builder fixes the problem, your deck is still out of action for days or weeks. And in other cases, if it's a deck of any size or a concealed finish where you have to take off the fascia, it can be thousands of dollars. All for a really small upfront price difference. So we work hard to help our clients understand that, while the cost is that little bit more, you've got longevity in your build."

As a way to help their builder clients who are quoting with the appropriate materials, VUETRADE has educational materials to back up their map. "There's a series of landing pages across our website for various purposes," Renshaw says. "So, for example, [vuetrade.com/coastal-ss](http://vuetrade.com/coastal-ss) will take you to a page with a video that introduces our 316 and 304 stainless ranges and then there's information on why you'd choose stainless and how gal will corrode in a salt-laden or wet environment."

The cost of living crisis has exacerbated the problem. "I completely understand why people are looking to get a cheaper quote,"



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says Renshaw. "But we want to reassure the builders who are quoting stainless product that they're doing the right thing. Because it may seem the more expensive option, but if we can help the builder to educate the owner as to why that stainless is worth the extra, then that's going to help everyone in the long run. Nobody looks good if a product starts to fail through corrosion."

**LOOKING GREAT**

"We're a traditional connectors company in that we focus strongly on the long service life and practical use of our products, but," says Shedden, "we're also innovating around the aesthetics of these products."

"You've got these beautiful timber decks and some of the fittings and fastenings can look a bit old-fashioned or solid. So we've introduced T-Blades and VUEBOLTS to pull together a more aesthetic, attractive finish, especially for people who are building their dream home."

The T-Blade/VUEBOLT combination replaces traditional bolt-down systems for decking posts and edge fences: a narrow blade of steel sits inside the timber post and is secured with an engineered male-female bolting system that secures inside the timber.



Above: A VUETRADE map showing which areas require stainless steel product (wave = 316, drop = 304).

This minimises the amount of visible steel, but has a highly secure attachment to the post, which can be lifted up to 75mm from ground level to provide a physical termite barrier. A stainless steel cap neatens up the attachment to the deck or concrete pad, hiding those bolts as well.

"With the range we have, we've tried to

make sure that people have got options to suit whatever they want to do," Renshaw says. "So you might want the T-Blade for aesthetics, but if the fixing is going to be invisible, you may not want to pay for one of the more premium products. And in those cases there are multiple supports you can use: we've got bolt-down options, we've got >>>

PHOTO AND IMAGE: COURTESY VUETRADE

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**Above:** When decking is delivered wrapped, keep it that way and off the ground until ready to install.

stirrup options, whatever is right for the builders and the end users.”

Bolt-down attachments are used for retrofitting a deck onto a pre-existing concrete pad, while cast-in stirrup and leg options can be used in cases where the builder is pouring-in concrete on site.

“Those are particularly good options if there are drainage problems, because you achieve a clear gap between the ground and the timber,” says Renshaw. “So you know timber is not soaking up any moisture, which is going to prolong the lifespan even further.”

Shedden adds, “Not to mention clearance for termite inspection.”

Cast-in options also cater for cyclonic conditions. “It maximises the wind upload capacity,” Shedden says. “So while we’re catering for choice of appearance, there are also options there for the wind upload capacities and ensuring that the decks are built to the spec for that particular area.”

That spec is something Shedden and his team work hard to quantify precisely. He says, “We need to understand exactly what the customer is trying to do and that might involve saying, ‘listen, can you get me through a drawing of the site? Or something your architect’s given you so we can understand better what you’re trying to do here?’ And then we can analyse our range and say “OK, here are our options and this is how we can achieve what you want to by

“Our engineer is there to bounce things off, because it’s important to ensure compliance.”

using these products.

“Our engineer is always there to bounce questions off. That’s not a small investment on a yearly basis, but it’s important for us to have that backup. To ensure that the product we put on the market is compliant. We hold that in very high regard. And it’s something that can’t be underestimated.”

One of the side benefits of both the extent of VUETRADE’s range and this certainty of compliance is timber subframes become a trusted option on sites that previously might have gone to steel.

“We see a lot of sloping or undulating locations where we can offer a range of solutions for the job,” Shedden says. “Previously they might have had a steel frame fabricated, but now they can actually visualise the timber structure with the range of products we have. And immediately that’s a saving, because it’s one less trade you need to go out to.”

Renshaw points out that “VUETRADE

offers Australian products for Australian conditions. We know that a majority of people live by or relatively close to a coastline. A lot of people have pools. So we’ve aimed for a product range that suits the environment we actually live in,” he says

“We make all the sheet material products, the joist hangers, the triple grips and the multi grips at our manufacturing facility in Victoria, which means extra jobs and it means that we know the product inside and out. The width of our stainless steel product range is something you won’t find with most other suppliers.”

Shedden agrees, and adds, “One big thing a lot of people probably don’t know is that we have the ability to custom manufacture product. We quite often see jobs that have been designed by an architect and there’s nothing on the market fit to perform the job they want. But we can work with them to design and custom manufacture a solution in stainless or gal.”

VUETRADE can also produce items from its standard 304 stainless steel range in 316 when they’re not already carried. “We want to play our part in making sure the homeowner gets the solution they want, based on their specific needs.” Renshaw says. “So, whether that is advising on the most appropriate material for the connectors, or fabricating something custom to suit, we’re happy to help out where we can. We’ve tried to make sure we can produce custom items in a timely manner at a price point that works for people.”

Ultimately, both Shedden and Renshaw reiterate that the VUETRADE team welcomes questions, from trade or homeowners, to help make sure the end product is perfectly suited to the installation environment”.

“We’re here to help,” says Renshaw. “We’ve got the resources and experience and we’ve got products in thousands of decks, in all parts of the country. If you’ve got problems, we’ve probably come across them before and we can use that experience to help you.

“We have a business development manager covering each state and they’re very experienced, knowledgeable guys who make sure that if people ask questions they’ll get an accurate answer. Our BDMS can tell you what you’ll need and where to find stockists near you – and they’ll find you the right person to talk to if you’re not sure about what’s required. We’re serious about service; most of the people in our office answering the phones have over a decade of experience selling these products. And those sales revolve around making sure you get the right products to keep that deck safe and secure throughout its service life.” T

**For more, visit <https://pentarchforestry.com.au> and <https://vuetrade.com>**