center to keep the composite decking we used from sagging over time, but wood decking can be spaced 16 in. on center. Instead of toenailing, which often splits the wood, use metal angles to hold down the joists. This also makes it easy to place the joists. Attach one alongside each joist location (Photo 3).

Cantilever the joists on all sides

Set the two outer joists and the center joist on the beams against the metal angles. Extend the joists over the beam on one side by 10-1/2 in., but let them run long over the opposite beam. Trim them to exact length when the deck is almost done so you can avoid ripping the last deck board.

Fasten the joists to the angles with deck screws. Screw on both rim joists—you’ll have to take the second rim joist back off when the joists are trimmed and then

stretcher across the ends of the beams, overhanging them each the same distance, then measure diagonally to make sure the beams are square to each other. Mark the location of the gravel pads (see Figure A) by cutting the grass with a shovel, then move the beams out of the way and cut out the sod where the gravel will go.

Establish the highest and lowest points with a string and string level to get a rough idea of how deep to dig and how much gravel to put in to make the blocks level (Figure A). Tamp the dirt with a block to make a firm base, then spread the gravel. Place the blocks and level them against each other and in both directions (Photo 1), adding or scraping out gravel as needed. Use construction adhesive between the 4-in.-thick blocks if you stack them, or use 8-in. blocks. If your site slopes so much that one side will be more than 2 ft. off the ground, support it on a 4x4 post on a frost footing instead—it’ll look better and be safer.

Set the beams across the blocks and square them to each other, using the same 1x4 stretchers to hold them parallel and square (Photo 2). If the beams are not perfectly level, shim them with plastic or pressure-treated wood shims (sold in home centers).

Mark the joist locations on the beams, starting with a joist on the end of each beam. We used 11 joists spaced 12 in. on center to keep the composite decking we used from sagging over time, but wood decking can be spaced 16 in. on center.

Instead of toenailing, which often splits the wood, use metal angles to hold down the joists. This also makes it easy to place the joists. Attach one alongside each joist location (Photo 3).