

# Finding the Hard Surface Flooring that is Right For You...

Today's selection of hard surfaces can be overwhelming to the consumer and without the right information the wrong choice can be a mistake a customer must live with for a long time. One of the great advantages of, and reasons for the trend toward, hard surfaces is the long life of the flooring so customers should educate themselves before deciding on the floor that is right for them. Research finds that most consumers spend eight to twelve months from the time they decide they want a new floor to their final purchase. Spending just a fraction of this time learning about the advantages and disadvantages of various options can save them years of buyer's remorse so they can enjoy what should be a beautiful investment in their home. As relates to hard surfaces, customers should consider the product, the rooms involved, different installation methods and relative cost of materials and labor. Hard surfaces include hardwood, laminate and tile and each have their own advantages and disadvantages.

Hardwood flooring is known for its timeless beauty and durability. It is a wonderful investment in home value and adds warmth and character to any space. Recent strides have been made in the factory applied finishes available to consumers including the addition of aluminum oxide to the polyurethane wear layer. This material known for its hardness is second only to diamonds and adds years to the wear warranty of many prefinished hardwoods for sale today. Though this addition addresses surface wear, consumers should still consider the wood's hardness rating, usually ranked compared to domestic oak flooring, when selecting a species for their home. Hardwood flooring is susceptible to denting so the higher the hardness rating the better in very active rooms. Many of the exotic hardwoods have very high ratings and are excellent choices for rooms that might house a pool table, a piano or other furniture that could damage softer woods like domestic cherry or maple. One thing to keep in mind about exotic wood flooring like Brazilian Cherry, though, is that it is more light sensitive than oak and visible darkening of the floor can be witnessed over just six months rather than year. So area rugs should be either moved from place to place over this initial oxidation period or temporarily avoided to allow the floor to darken uniformly.

For active families concerned over possible damage to and denting of real hardwood floors, modern laminates are a great option. Far removed from the earlier styles originally on the market, new laminate floors have texture, color and grain variation and even beveled edges to make them look more like real wood. Since the surface of laminates are made exclusively of aluminum oxide they are always a matte finish and are warrantied for stain, fade, wear and moisture. Manufacturer reps enjoy writing on laminates with a permanent marker and demonstrating how easily it cleans off with nail polish remover. Some will even go so far as light a match on the floor to show that it can't be damaged even by a flame. The floor's fade resistance can be important in rooms with many windows and make it possible to install one room at a time without worrying whether the color will match on an addition even a year later. Laminate moisture warranties usually cover surface spills so keep in mind that water is an enemy of both laminates and hardwood, doing severe damage in the case of a flood or plumbing leak. And the proper cleaners that evaporate quickly should always be used to avoid adding moisture to the floor. Neither hardwoods or laminates are warrantied for scratches though laminates are usually more resistant and their matte finish makes any surface scratch less visible than a hi-gloss hardwood floor. Warranty paperwork for either flooring option recommends felt pads under furniture and the use of rubber wheeled rather than plastic or metal wheeled casters.

Because of the potential for damage due to plumbing leaks, consumers sometimes opt for tile in kitchens and bathrooms. Ceramic, porcelain and stone tiles are available to suit any decor. Ceramic tiles are either red-clay or white-clay bodies with a baked decorative glaze on the surface. This glaze has a PEI or hardness rating of one to five, with five being the hardest. Residential floor tiles require a rating of three or better and ratings of four or five are usually thicker and baked at a higher temperature making them more durable. One drawback of ceramic tile to consider is the potential of chipping or cracking and the struggle to keep grout lines clean especially in active rooms. Porcelain tiles can address both these concerns since they are manufactured from a finer,

denser body that is usually similar in color to the surface glaze, rather than a white ceramic tile whose red-clay body stands out with each new chip. Porcelain tiles can also be rectified or cross-cut to avoid size variation that comes with any baked product. For this reason, rectified tile can be laid with either a very fine grout line or, in some cases, none at all. Stone tiles are yet another option for consumers but can be limiting due to their expense and upkeep. They require sealing to avoid stain and regular maintenance of the surface which many customers prefer to avoid.

So in considering their options, consumers should take into account the rooms involved. More active spaces lend themselves easily to hard surfaces but a formal dining room might be a better place for a hi-gloss wood while a laminate could be perfect for the kids playroom or den. And, as mentioned previously, tile might be a better option for an area that could be affected by water like the foyer entry, kitchen, utility room or baths. Customers who often prefer carpet underfoot in their bedrooms should definitely extend hard surfaces into their hallways since this is where carpet will show the earliest signs of wear. And with hard surfaces dividing individual bedrooms, carpet can be replaced in each room as needed without worrying about matching at hallway seams or having to replace an entire section of the home at one time.

Installation methods are also another consideration in choosing a floor. Hardwood flooring can either be engineered to be glued down to a slab subfloor or solid 3/4" wood can be nailed to a wood subfloor. In the case of newly poured slabs, some builders prefer to use a floating wood floor that either

clicks together or is glued only at the tongue and groove. This avoids any problems later when glue-down wood flooring can sometimes come loose and glue must be injected under the floor to reattach it to the slab. Traditional wood flooring is usually 3" wide but trends have been toward wider planks and long-strip flooring for a more casual look. Laminate floors are always floated and most of today's products no longer require glue at the seams. The floor is relatively easy to install and rests on a pad that cushions the floor and provides a moisture barrier. When purchasing a laminate or floating hardwood floor customers should consider upgrading to a sound deadening pad since floating floors can tend to echo and sound hollow unless a high quality pad is used. Tile installation is more expensive than either laminate or hardwood especially if the customer has a wood subfloor. A concrete board should be used to prepare the wood subfloor for tile since it is installed in hard drying thin-set that requires a foundation without flex or movement. Also, with a newly poured slab customers should take precautions to avoid later damage from cracks in the slab. A crack suppression membrane can be installed under the tile to allow for some shifts in the slab due to cracking.

When comparing relative costs of flooring options a good guide would be to weigh a retailer's similar instock products in each category. Expect to spend \$7-8/sft installed for basic instock hardwoods while laminates can be installed for as little as \$4.50-5/sft. Instock ceramic tile can cost \$5.50-6/sft installed over a concrete slab with additional material and labor expenses when a wood subfloor is involved. Pricing of all three categories can vary a great deal according to product and warranty but these general estimates can help you determine in which rooms you want to focus most of your budget.

Your best resource is an educated and friendly salesperson who will guide you through the process with your specific needs and concerns in mind. Whether shopping for hard surfaces, carpet or vinyl flooring he or she can help you find products that suit your lifestyle and budget.

Michelle Roberts is a salesperson at ABC Flooring Center. Please feel free to contact her by phone (850-599-2546) or email (mdaddison@hotmail.com) with any questions or for a free estimate.

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