

Buy and Care for Hardwood Flooring

By Amy Black

Hardwood floors have always added character and warmth to a room and they have never been more popular than today as a decorating trend. Wood flooring is enjoying renewed popularity because it promotes a healthier living environment and can be used with virtually any design scheme.

Before investing in a hardwood floor, take a look at your options. Familiarize yourself with the types of hardwood flooring before you visit a dealer. Engineered flooring is available as strips or planks and it is preferable to solid wood flooring in environments where moisture is a concern. Long strip flooring is constructed of individual slats glued together end to end to form strips that are installed in a tongue and groove process. Strip flooring is usually 2-1/2 inches wide while plank flooring can be up to 12 inches wide. Parquet flooring consists of small strips of wood made from hardwoods like oak, cherry, mahogany, beech and pecan. The traditional parquet floor is laid to produce geometric patterns such as herringbone and checkerboard. Block flooring, as the name implies, is constructed as a block and cross-banded with plywood. When it is designed to look like parquet it is referred to as parquetry. The price range of wood flooring is based on the grain, wood origin and imperfections. If you are seeking a more rustic look, a lesser grade will have more character and be easier on your budget.

Oak accounts for about 90 percent of the wood flooring market share since its neutral color goes with any room decor. Other popular wood choices include cherry, bamboo, ash, maple and birch. Consumers today have a choice of low gloss or high gloss finishes plus a wide range of wood colors from butterscotch to walnut and cinnamon. Some of the new trends in wood floors include highly defined grain patterns, wider slats and the use of contrasting borders.

When you shop for wood flooring take detailed measurements of the rooms and create scale drawings if possible. The flooring sales specialist at your local hardwood flooring dealer will use the information to provide you with an estimate and suggest woods that will work best for your room situation and budget. Keep in mind that lighter colored flooring can make a small room feel more spacious, while dark-colored floors can make a large room feel cozy. Also, light flooring will show dirt more than darker finishes.

Another option is adding a different type of wood to an already finished floor. You can pull up old pieces of wood and replace them with new planks of a different type to achieve a very modern look. Adding a darker urethane finish is an affordable way to add panache to a wood floor and does not involve as much labor as some custom options. When applied properly, a dark finish mimics the look of exotic hardwoods while the urethane resists wear and requires no buffing or waxing.

Some homeowners resist the idea of wood flooring because they believe it is difficult to care for. The truth is new technology and innovative products have made it easier to care for than ever. Finishes differ among manufacturers so you should always follow the

recommended maintenance tips. Still, with any type of hardwood floor there are basic steps you can take to maintain its beauty and durability.

Sweep the wood once a week with a soft bristle broom, or vacuum to remove surface dust. Wipe up spills with a dry or slightly damp towel. Use doormats at entrances to catch dirt that is tracked in from outside. If you have a wood floor in your kitchen, place an area rug in front of the sink to catch water spills. Waxed wood floors can be buffed periodically to restore their shine. Urethane finishes resist wear and stains and require no stripping, buffing or waxing.

The majority of wood floors installed today have urethane finishes, which means they can even be used in bathrooms and kitchens. Misting the floor with a mixture of one-quarter cup of white vinegar and one quart of warm water will clean most urethane floors. Simply sponge mop with the mixture and towel dry. A urethane floor can be restored to its original appearance by having it professionally screened and recoated with a new coat of urethane. Types of urethane differ in sheen, drying time, odor, ease of installation, and color.

If you're torn between replacing carpeting or installing wood flooring, consider that carpeting lasts between seven and 10 years with normal residential use, while hardwood floors can last a lifetime. And if your family suffers from allergies, hardwood floors can dramatically reduce the bacteria, allergens and dirt that get trapped deep in wall-to-wall carpeting. With proper care, hardwood flooring becomes more beautiful with time and may even enhance the resale value of your home.