

How To Determine If Hardwood Floors are for You

By Curt Hagedorn

If there's one trend you see in every magazine and on every home decorating show, it's that carpet is out and "hardwood" is in. Of course, there really is nothing like an expanse of gleaming wood to create a warm, homey feel, and hardwood is also a perfect backdrop for furniture and for the tremendous variety of rugs from contemporary to traditional that are available to home decorators today. Simply put, it's a step up from that "sea of beige" wall to wall carpet that used to be the norm. Part of what's driving the trend however, is the availability of a tremendous amount of new varieties of "hardwood" floors from actual solid, through and through wood, to composite veneered materials and laminate flooring which is actually a composite material faced with a photographic detail of wood which is uncannily realistic and so tough that, for example, some hardwood lines have a limited warranty of 25 years in residential applications. Here are some pros and cons of each.

- 1) Real hardwood. Real hardwood flooring is of course the highest quality choice, in that the grain goes through and through and it can be refinished many times over if damaged or just because of natural wear and tear. You can buy unfinished hardwood and stain and finish it to your exact specifications. And though you will have to use special cleaners and finishers on your hardwood floors, with proper care they'll last even longer than your house itself. Good quality wood flooring can run from \$4 a square foot on up depending on the wood, finish and so on. And while real hardwood flooring can be a do it yourself project, special requirements begin with acclimatizing the wood to the room its intended for by leaving all the packages open and in the room for at least 5 days prior to installation. You'll probably want to have a power nailer or special flooring nailer. And you'll need to check each individual plank for imperfections, etc. because, of course, it's natural wood. Wood flooring also isn't recommended for below grade uses like basements or in places which might tend to be damp like bathrooms and laundry areas. If you do choose to install it yourself, make sure you come armed with a list of questions, and if your supplier offers a class, seminar or even will send someone out to assess the situation before you buy, take advantage of the offer, and you'll have a gleaming hardwood floor for years to come.

- 2) “Engineered” or veneer hardwood flooring. This type of flooring is most commonly called engineered wood, and it’s made up of several layers, the topmost being a hardwood veneer (think of plywood.) Engineered wood floors represent an excellent compromise between hardwood and laminate, and not only because of a generally lower price range than hardwood. Installation can be somewhat simpler as well, because some engineered flooring is of the “floating” variety, meaning that the flooring is laid over a vapor barrier but is not actually attached to the underlying floor. It attaches to itself with a basically tongue and groove mechanism and floats over the floor below which also help alleviate problems with expansion and contraction. Engineered flooring can actually be refinished in some cases, but usually at the most only once or twice, depending on the depth of the veneer. Engineered flooring stands up to surface wear and tear similarly to hardwood floor.
- 3) Laminate flooring. This type of flooring is becoming increasingly popular. It’s pennies a square foot compared to hardwood or veneer, is easy to install (similar to engineered flooring) and stands up well to wear and tear, including moisture which is why more and more people are choosing laminate floors for high traffic areas like kitchens, family and kids rooms. The disadvantages? It can be damaged, similar to linoleum tile which also is often serviced with what is basically a decal or picture, and of course, it will wear over time and need to be replaced, as it cannot be refinished like wood. However, since good quality laminate flooring is guaranteed for 25 years, wear and tear may not be of great concern.