

FIX IT UP!

Bruce Turner

The Bottom Line on Wood Flooring

When your parents or grandparents bought their homes in the '50s, the floor was merely seen as something to walk on. Homeowners had hardwood floors in the living room, tile in the bathroom, linoleum in the kitchen and carpeting (did you ever have that blue shag?) in the bedroom for warm feet in the morning, and paid little attention to any of it.

Boy, are those days over. Today flooring is a design feature, a fashion statement and a way to personalize your home. The Wall Street Journal wrote last year that homeowners are picking stone tile, fiberglass, cork, bamboo and even leather for their fashionable floors. It's amazing the changes we're seeing.

Carpeting is no longer in fashion, except for the bedroom. Just about anyone who can afford hardwood flooring is choosing it. And they're no longer stuck with choosing between oak and oak (red and white). There's a tremendous assortment of exotic hardwoods available today –like cypress, Australian dark brown spotted gum and Brazilian ipe and cherry, which are only a little more expensive than oak or maple.

Natural wood isn't the only alternative. Engineered hardwood flooring is very popular – it consists of a thin veneer of hardwood bonded to an underlying layer of plywood or fiberboard. It's less expensive, looks nice, and the underlayer holds up better against moisture. The problem with engineered flooring is that you can't sand it as often as the old-fashioned _” hardwood boards. Sand the engineered product more than once or twice and the top veneer is gone. I always recommend natural hardwoods if the budget permits.

Speaking of the budget, you can preserve yours by installing your own wood floor. The most popular hardwood form is still the old tongue-and-groove board, which means that the jutting edge (tongue) of one board fits into the grooved end of the board next to it. Slotting them together isn't difficult – you just need basic carpentry skills and a couple of specialized tools (ask your hardwood supply guy). And don't forget to leave some expansion joints at the walls, because wood flooring does expand and you don't want it to buckle.

But as to sanding and finishing the floor yourself, I have one word for you – don't. Early in my contracting career I sanded and finished a floor, and I swore I would never do it again. It's a hard, dusty, miserable job requiring specialized equipment like a giant belt sander and an edging machine, plus experience and lots of muscle.

Hire a professional who advertises “dustless” sanding – the sander is attached to a vacuum compressor on a truck outside – and let him do your finishing as well, because you'll get better results and the cost isn't high. I strongly recommend using one of the new water-based acrylic finishes instead of the old polyurethane. It's more environmentally friendly, doesn't discolor the wood, dries quickly and doesn't have toxic odors.

Choose your wood flooring based on the cost, appearance and durability of the wood. And don't forget to budget for rugs.

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