

From Walker Zanger, ceramic tiles from the "Matouche" collection re-create textures like leather and crocodile skin.

HARD TO BEAT

HARD-SURFACE MATERIALS MAKE TIMELESS FLOORING OPTIONS



ABOVE: Make a statement of elegance with beautiful hardwood, here in planks of Brazilian Ruby Ironwood from Armstrong's Valenza Collection. Find Armstrong hardwood flooring at CC Carpet, The Home Depot, Lowe's and S&H Distributing.

The visual impact of your floor is immediate.

It is the largest continuous horizontal area in your home and unites every room of the house. Choosing a hard floor surface can involve literally dozens of decisions. Do you want stone? Ceramic or porcelain tile? Hardwood floors? What color, what stain, what finish? Do you want a pattern?

Before you get too dizzy, here is a brief rundown of some current options, plus advice from local specialists.

DO YOUR HOMEWORK

A good way to become acquainted with the current flooring options is to visit a flooring supply showroom and talk to the professionals there. "An expert knows what products work better than others and what options work for various needs," says Fred Uddin, owner of Kingdom Flooring and Rugs. Know your budget, he says, review the floors you've seen and loved, and determine what kind of foot traffic you have. "If you have large dogs, then tile or hard surface woods such as hickory or maple work better," Uddin adds.

Armed with the best information, you can then make a choice among all the complexities.

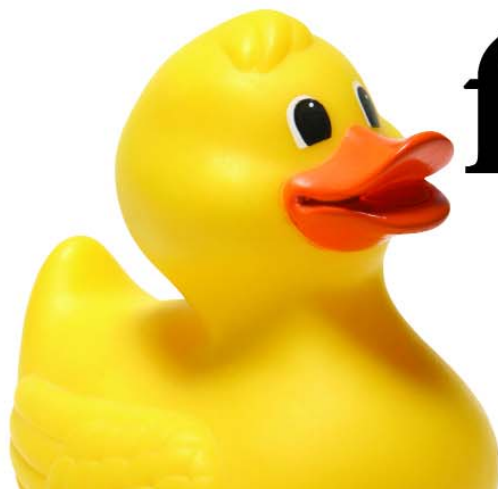
CLASSIC WOOD

Hardwood floors are a timeless classic, loved for their warmth and elegance. Uddin suggests you be prepared to make the following decisions: the type of wood, the width ("2 1/4 inch is traditional, but we see many clients now going up to 5 and 6 inches," says Uddin.); custom-finished or engineered wood; and the type of finish, with distressed or hand-scraped being highly popular right now.

"A hardwood floor is an investment, and it will increase your home's resale value if you have a quality product that can be sanded and refinished multiple times," Uddin says.



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ABOVE: Have the best of both worlds: the classic look of wood and wear resistance with high-pressure laminate flooring by Wilsonart Flooring. Carpet Outlets of Texas is a Wilsonart Flagship Retailer.



ABOVE: Cork is a green flooring option that looks great in traditional or contemporary kitchens. Photo courtesy Kitchen Design Concepts

ANTIQUE APPEAL

A subset of hardwood floors is antique wood, which is wood salvaged from old buildings. Its beauty and appeal comes from the changes wrought over the decades by natural elements such as wind, rain, hail, snow and sun.

Specialty companies, such as Antique Building Products, locate and acquire 18th through early 20th century factories, barns and homes that are headed for demolition, and salvage the scarce antique wood. The wood is de-nailed and kiln-dried to ensure the correct moisture content. Years of aging and exposure to weather have given these materials a rich patina that emerges through the milling process and makes them a perfect fit for everything from the finest homes to rustic cabins.

ROCK SOLID

Stone and tile are other timeless classics. Uddin sees natural stone, such as marble, used in high-end projects, but these days, porcelain tiles can be made to look like natural stone without the large price tag. In fact, he says it's more durable than natural stone.

Uddin says large tiles, 18 x 18 inches and up to 24 x 24 inches, are currently in demand. "There is a misconception that you can't use large tiles in a small room, but bigger tile makes an area look even bigger," he says.

CONCRETE BEAUTY

Concrete has come in from the outdoors. A low-maintenance flooring option, it should last the life of your home. Kim Creager, co-owner of Decorative Concrete Supply, which sells concrete stains, sealers, stamping tools and more, says owners of inexpensive houses to million-dollar homes are opting for concrete floors. "It is easy to maintain. To clean it, just mop with water and mild dish soap and occasionally wax it," she says. "It shouldn't need to be resealed if you use a quality sealer. You get what you pay for."

Concrete floors also are prized by allergy-sufferers. New "green" options in concrete staining are becoming popular, according to Creager. In the past, stains were acid based, but now water-based stain has a lot of versatility. "It has no odor and a wider color palette," Creager says. "You can get vibrant yellows, greens and other colors as well as earth tones."

WOOD ALTERNATIVE

Many builders interested in building sustainable homes are choosing bamboo as a flooring option because it actually is a grass that regenerates without the need for replanting and requires minimal fertilization and pesticides. Bamboo is extremely durable and looks great in homes.

Mary Kathryn Reese, co-owner of Kitchen Design Concepts, says horizontal cut bamboo is the hardest and most durable cut available.

"I'm fond of bamboo flooring because it is a natural, green product and can be sanded and refinished for a reasonable price," Uddin adds.

POP THE CORK

Cork is beginning to surface as a green flooring option. It is peeled bark from a tree, so when it's harvested, the tree lives, and years later the bark grows back. Cork is valued for its durability and moderate price points. "Cork is resilient and durable while being forgiving to the body — knees, hips, back," Reese says.

Cork also has good thermal and acoustic qualities, in addition to being hypo-allergenic and fire resistant, Reese adds.

Today's cork floors are much nicer looking than cork floors from the '50s and '60s. Uddin has 22 color options in his showroom.

"There are many color and pattern choices to choose from," Reese says. "Some cork we have done actually looks like burl wood and is very rich looking. It looks great with a variety of design styles, from contemporary to French country." ▶



ABOVE LEFT: White matte concrete tile in an argyle pattern brings a soft contemporary touch to any room. Photo of Angela Adams concrete floor tiles for Ann Sacks (www.annsacks.com)

ABOVE RIGHT: Impressive century-smoothed limestone from the “Pierre de Cluny” collection by Marazzi, shown here in “Moka.”



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LEFT: From Mannington Mills Inc., “Resilient” is a great solution for moisture-prone areas. The vinyl flooring, here in “Ardesia,” comes in textures from natural stone and carved tiles to wood grains and stunning geometrics.

More Words to the Wise

- **Constructive Advice:** Look at your flooring choice on a large scale. A small scale won't give you the best idea of what it will really look like.
- **Plan It:** When you visit a showroom, you'll find it helpful to have your floor plan with you.
- **Evaluate Your Lifestyle:** "Ask yourself: 'How do I like to live?'" suggests world-renowned designer Ann Sacks. "Do you have a lovely formal living room and dining room in which you like to entertain? Or is your home full of kids and friends and neighbors and pizza at the last minute?"



ABOVE: From Artistic Tile's "Field Mosaics" collection, a classic basketweave tile in "Azul Macauba Canestro." Shop for Artistic Tile products at Antique Floors.

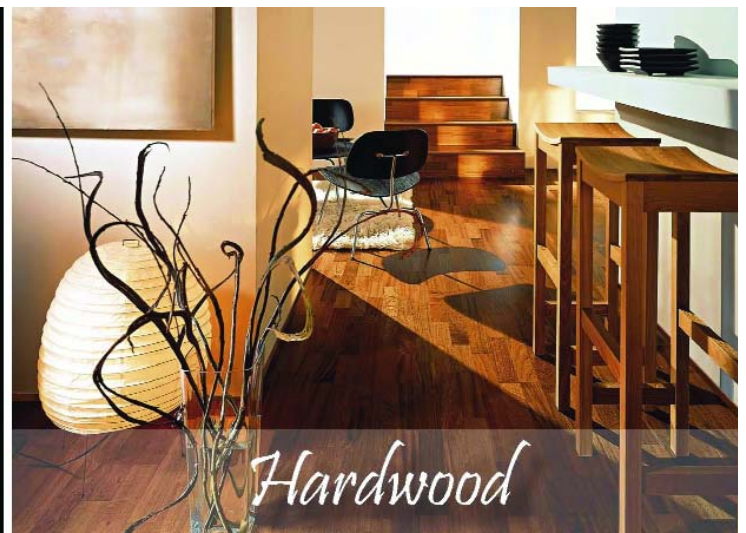
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