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Watch Your Step: New flooring materials will have you looking down

By Carrie Whitney

If your motto at home lately has become “don’t look down!” it might be time to explore some new flooring options. While carpet, traditional hardwoods and linoleum certainly remain popular choices, even these old standbys have earned some modern twists. Of course, prices vary as much as the materials, but with the variety of alternatives—ranging from glass and metal tiles to cork and rubber—the perfect flooring for each room in your house is just waiting to be discovered.



Photo by Art Grice courtesy of Teragren Fine Bamboo Flooring

BAMBOO IS A POPULAR FLOORING OPTION due to the fact that it's a good quality hardwood, and also an environmentally friendly choice.

AU NATURAL

Today, natural flooring means much more than hardwood. Cork and bamboo are two materials that currently enjoy plenty of popularity. Bamboo can be natural, which is the color of the plant itself, or carbonized, which boasts a color similar to light walnut. While bamboo is recognized as a good hardwood product, what makes it even more special is that unlike trees, which can take decades or centuries to grow back, bamboo replenishes itself in about three years. That's great news for the environment.

Cork flooring has become another prevalent choice; it looks like natural cork but comes in a variety of patterns and colors. Some manufacturers have as many as 25 distinct looks. Cork is installed on a floating floor substrate, and the pieces are clicked together in tongue-and-groove fashion. What that means is that installation can be effective even when the floor underneath is not completely flat, making installation a much easier process.

If natural flooring sounds good, but you are looking for something more traditional, new choices in hardwoods are available—many of which are more environmentally friendly than traditional woods. Lyptus by Weyerhaeuser, for example, is made from wood that is a hybrid of two eucalyptus trees grown in Brazil. The trees thrive in the warm climate and grow so quickly they can be harvested in approximately 15 years.

Tad Provence at The Floor Gallery & Interiors revels in discovering new exotic hardwoods like Brazilian walnut. He says that since these trees have grown in a hot climate, they are automatically going to be able to stand up to the warmest of Georgia's summers. "It's a fashion business, but it's also a performance business," he says.

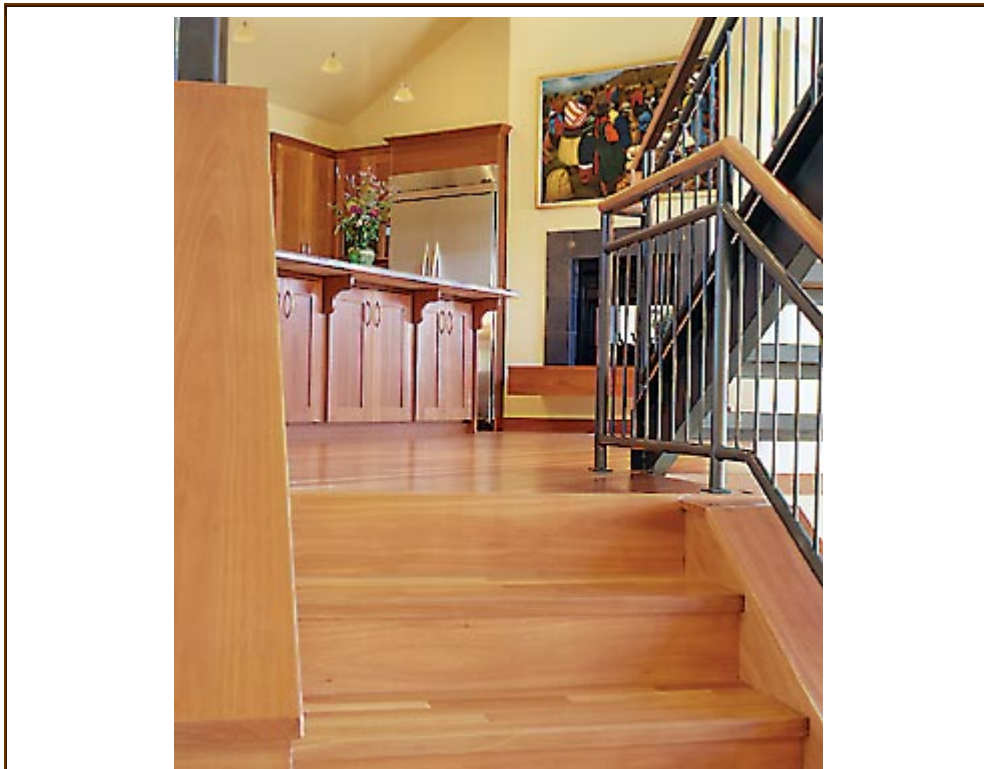


Photo courtesy of Weyerhaeuser

NEW CHOICES IN HARDWOODS, such as Lyptus, which is made from a hybrid of two eucalyptus trees, offer a fresh version of a more traditional look.

Speaking of fashion, how about combining natural stone with metal accents? While stone is highly decorative in its own right, adding a bronze or iron decorative piece between tiles can make a truly unique statement. It's like giving your floor jewelry. Glass tiles are another beautiful choice that will add flair to a room.

"In the world of natural stone, some of the most popular flooring trends are multipiece and multicolor patterns, larger piece patterns, planking, utilization of glass and metals as inserts, and multistep finishes," says Angelle Schaumburg of Materials Marketing Architectural Stone & Tile, a company that has its own quarry in Mexico and fabricates hand-carved natural stone. One of the truly wonderful things about natural stone and other natural products is that variation exists within each piece, ensuring that no two floors can ever be exactly the same.

And surprisingly, a natural stone floor can fit within a reasonable budget. "The days of stone floors exceeding \$20 per square foot are quickly coming to an end," Schaumburg says. "We are able to compete in the marketplace against ceramics and faux or cast stone."



Photo courtesy of The Laminate Store

TODAY'S LAMINATES look more like hardwoods than ever before, and due to a layer of aluminum oxide coating, some are actually harder and more durable than their more expensive counterparts.

COPYCATS

The realm of faux flooring also has taken a turn for the better, with new products focusing on definition and depth. Laminates now look more like wood, tile and even marble. "I think we're going to see some beveled edges on laminate," Provence says. Whatever the design, the

intention is for the laminate flooring to look more like the material it is imitating. And according to Provence, laminates are actually harder than wood (that means more durable). The strength comes from the layer of aluminum oxide coating the laminate material. "About the only thing harder than aluminum oxide is diamonds," Provence says. For anyone not shopping for a diamond floor, a laminate would probably make a good substitute in any basement, kitchen or foyer, although Provence has seen laminate flooring used throughout entire houses. Laminate is also an installation-friendly product, quicker and easier than putting in hardwoods.

While it might not be as attractive as laminate, linoleum flooring is widely used in commercial applications and can have some applicability to homes, too. One benefit of linoleum is that it comes in a wide variety of patterns. It is also useful in garages, mudrooms and basements or other rooms that get heavy traffic. Another product that has gained a spot in many households is rubber, in the form of matting or tiles that can be found in geometric shapes. Rubber is popular in home gyms but can also be used in other informal areas. In fact, Provence has a rubber floor in one of his garages.



Photography by Gregg Willett

FOR A LESS PERMANENT FLOORING SOLUTION, InterfaceFLOR tiles, which are applied with a low-tack adhesive, can be pulled up and replaced as needed or desired.

CARPET WITHOUT COMMITMENT

When considering carpet, forget about wall-to-wall—the newest thing in carpeting is tile. At InterfaceFLOR's showroom in Midtown, flooring shoppers can browse 32 styles that come in a variety of textures, patterns and colors to select not the one perfect design, but a few that catch their eyes. Then they can mix and match at home. The floor coverings are sold by the tile and

placed by the tile, so “you have a flexibility to mix your product up,” says showroom manager Michele DuBard.

FLOR products are very much do-it-yourself. Each tile comes with low-tack adhesive tabs, which can be pulled up. The ability to pull up the tiles not only allows them to be switched around into new patterns, but it also makes it possible to rinse the tile if something spills on it or even replace it with a new tile if it gets stained. (That certainly is a lot less expensive than replacing or even cleaning an entire carpet!) The product sticks to any hard surface like concrete, tile or wood.

Some of the more popular tile styles include Toy Poodle, a twisted loop with a beveled edge; Thick and Thin, a bold geographic stripe that comes in varying thicknesses; and Solid Ground, a solid-color cut pile with a beveled edge. FLOR also has hand-felted tiles and some that look like natural materials, such as Coir2 made of sisal and coir.

In addition to combining patterns or colors, you can integrate FLOR tiles of different textures and materials. “You can do whatever you want to do—that’s the cool thing about it,” DuBard says. “I like to encourage people to mix the products.” Or for the faint of (design) heart, showroom representatives can help you plan the pattern that you will create at home.



Photo courtesy of Materials Marketing

CONCRETE IS AN EXTREMELY versatile flooring material that can be made to look like tile, slate, brick or other surfaces.

EASY CLEANUP

Each different type of flooring material calls for specific cleaning methods. Unlike the removable and rinseable FLOR tiles, most materials have to stay on the floor, so the trick is finding the right substance that will clean without stripping or leaving a sticky film. Some products can clean

laminates, wood and tile. Flooring material producers are also sensitive to the need for durability and have developed methods that will help keep even natural stone from wearing out quickly. "The quality of sealers that are currently available has driven the concerns of warranty and cost down significantly," Schaumburg says.

If the time does come to replace or refinish your flooring, those with hardwoods might consider a new, dustless process that will turn having your floors sanded from a nightmare to a dream come true. Great American Floors uses the Atomic system by BonaKemi, which eliminates dust from the sanding process, making it "a more convenient and faster process," says Jason Seltzer, co-owner of Great American Floors.

Flooring materials today have certainly taken great strides from days past. Even when considering natural materials like wood and stone, innovations have made them more durable and easier to install. Contemporary products like rubber and modular carpeting allow homeowners to individualize flooring to suit their exact needs at any specific time. With the variety of options available today, keeping your feet on the ground has gotten better than ever.