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From staid to stylish, the hottest decorating trends

By Dina Sarrocelli

From light to dark, narrow to wide, domestic to exotic, smooth to distressed, consumers' demands for wood flooring have evolved dramatically during the past 10 years. While it wasn't too long ago that wood simply offered a clean, natural dimension to an overall interior design palette, today's decorating demands that flooring evolve from being a calm, almost passive element to one with an integral—and quite powerful—colorful and textural contribution. The following are the seven hottest decorating trends in the wood flooring category:

Trend #1: Getting into character

While distressed flooring has been popular for some time, according to the National Wood Flooring Association, the new trend is toward achieving a distressed look with new flooring, said Alina Howard, communications director. "This is accomplished through handscraping and hand-distressing.

Stippling, where people are looking at wood flooring as though as if it were in the past," said Loretta Hill, vice president of marketing for Best-Franc, whose rustic, Swiss Memories flooring series has been a popular seller. "The trend right now is toward a more rustic look, more character-grate products."

However, Robiulati reports that while distressed products continue to sell well, he thinks their popularity may be thinning out slightly. "People are moving toward a soft, rustic look—nothing very aggressive, something that still has a lot of character but is less gauged than what we've seen in the past." About a year ago, BR-111 Exotic

Hardwood Flooring introduced its Antiquity Hand-Scraped line, which has done well, noted Jason Strong, vice president of sales. Columbia, Flooring's ginger bread walnut, part of the Laura Ashley hardwood flooring series, has garnered much attention among consumers, according to Steve Bunch, director of business development. The design takes the deep, dark color of walnut and creates a lighter natural look that brings an all-through color approach. "We use wood bleach and exposure to light to change the color depth of the darker walnut species," he said. "The

surface is then lightly sculpted to add depth to the floor, making it appear aged for generations, but with all the performance of a brand-new prefinished hardwood floor."

Trend #2: Going exotic

"As a rule, exotic hardwood flooring has been among the hottest sellers within the hardwood category," Strong said, whose latest introductions have included Angico, Brazilian hickory and Maschiano pecan. "Each species features excellent natural color variation and interesting graining."

Mike Beavers, senior vice presi-

dent of marketing and merchandising for Anderson Hardwood Floors, agrees. "Exotics and handcrafted products are hot for Anderson right now," he said. "Traditional oak looks that were big a few years ago have now given way to the more popular exotics and handcrafted products."

At Armstrong, exotic species are still the hot item, said Sara Bahinski, principal designer. "Exotic species such as fingerwood, which is growing in popularity, Santos mahogany, Pangali ironwood and kempas are all the rage," she said. "They take their distinctiveness from a combi-

Trends

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handwood trend is showing is when a hot look starts showing up in the next generation of fashion in mainstream flooring."

Trend #3: The dark side

"Finger" was on top of the Nielsen's, and light-colored woods, which adorned the sitcom's sets, were on top of consumers' decorating wish lists. However, today's viewing is more "CSI" when it comes to TV, and darker stylings have also crept into the interior design mindset. "Depth of rich colors such as our Signature Colors in espresso and walnut," she said.

blacks and other deep colors in hardwood—have emerged and will be an enduring trend," Bahinski said. "From a visual standpoint, hardwood trend is showing is when a hot look starts showing up in the next generation of fashion in mainstream flooring."

Armstrong has perfected a new type of distressing with an almost sandy look—dark stain and sanding. "We use dark stain and sanding on light woods like yellow birch and maple," Ann Krupik, executive vice president and marketing director for Terragen, also sees more consumers looking to deeper hues. "Although Terragen's Signature Naturals product line is vertical grain caramelized, is still our biggest seller, customers are increasingly favoring darker tones, such as our Signature Colors in espresso and walnut," she said.

Strong says that board widths greater than 3 inches have substantially outpaced the company's traditional strip flooring products. "As a result, most of our product lines are offered in wider board widths, in-

Trend #4: Going wide

Wide-plank floors—defined as those that are at least three inches wide—have also gained popularity. Wide planks tend themselves to a variety of decorating styles, from dining rooms and formal living rooms and bedrooms to comfortable and relaxing bedrooms and entryways. "Wide planks and extra-wide planks are popular and perfect," or words we published and printed, depending on consumer's personal decorating preferences and lifestyles.

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cluding 3-, 4-, 5 1/2-, 6- and 7 1/2-in.," he said.

Wide-plank floors are offered in a variety of species, and because of their increased width, it is important to keep in mind that they require special care during the installation process. Additionally, they respond more readily to moisture fluctuations and are more prone to cup when excessive moisture is present in the subfloor.

Trend #5: Being thin

As the preoccupation with thinness has even seeped into flooring, "Trimmer solids, like our 7/8-inch products, have become extremely popular in the last several years," reportedly Bahinski. "BR-111's 3/4-inch solid flooring," BR-111's Strong said, "lower pricing and effective use of raw materials coupled with staple and glue-down installation options, have resulted in a growing interest from consumers."

Trend #6: Getting personal

"The trends we're seeing this year are a continuation of the same things we saw last year, and they all boil down to one thing—customization," NVP's Howard said. "Borders and medallions are very hot. These can be refitted into existing floors, which makes them quite affordable, but custom borders and medallions are more popular than ever. These can be very simple or very intricate."

Additionally, Armstrong's Bahinski said that because some specialty hardwoods and exotics are pricier than traditional hardwoods, customization can accommodate everyone and present interesting design options. Specialty hardwoods can be used as flooring accents, or as the centerpiece in a room bordered by low-expense species. "We said 'They're not also species,' and matched between color and species or used in mixed media applications with hardwood and stone. It's all about your own personal style and setting your interior apart from others."

Trend #7: Engineering success

While there will always be a solid

market for solid wood flooring, manufacturers note the growth of their engineered lines. "Engineered flooring across the hardwood category continues to gain market share, especially in regions of the country where concrete slab construction is the accepted norm," Strong said. "At BR-111, we have continued to focus on our lineup of engineered products, particularly those that feature a thick-sawn wearlayer, because they are as durable as solid flooring and may be sanded and refinished. Consumers are attracted to the flexible installation options offered by engineered products, including styles, glue-down and floating techniques that allow for flooring to be installed on any level of the home." ■