

floor covering news

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Renewable bamboo

The environmentally friendly alternative

By Louis Iannaco

For those looking for a true green choice as a flooring option, mills are answering the call by supplying one of the most viable, environmentally friendly stories they have in their arsenal: bamboo. With the "nature moving indoors" trend still going strong, combined with emphasis on anything green, getting the story out about what bamboo has to offer has become a priority number one with a growing number of manufacturers.

"Bamboo is rapidly renewable," said Gary Keeble Jr., marketing manager for U.S. Floors. "Bamboo suitable for flooring matures in five-and-a-half to six years. When harvested, multiple plant stands generate from the stalk. Woods with comparable hardness to bamboo reach maturity in 50 to 150 years.

"We try and educate retail salespeople through product knowledge sessions with our reps, literature and merchandising. The Internet is important to green products such as bamboo. Green consumers are typically more Internet savvy and more apt to research purchases via the Web. However, the typical end user who is not 'activist' green, will have to rely much more heavily on the retail salesperson for education on bamboo."



Whetting her appetite, Teragren's Signature Naturals solid strip bamboo flooring collection satisfies the varying tastes of the consumer by providing the product in several different shades.

Teragren's bamboo flooring "is a beautiful, durable and rapidly renewable resource that meets the growing demand for environmentally friendly products," said Ann Knight, executive vice president/marketing director. "Unlike hardwood trees requiring more than 60 years to mature, bamboo is a grass growing up to 2 feet daily that is renewably harvested over

and over from the same plant. Moso bamboo—which is the best species for flooring such as our Optimum 5.5 Moso—harvested sooner than maturity can result in flooring products as soft as pine or fir and damage to the plant itself."

Bamboo also relieves pressure on degraded forests, she added, because it releases 35% more oxygen than a comparable cluster of trees. "Those benefits extend to bamboo products in residential and commercial settings—Teragren's bamboo flooring products can last for many generations and 'lock up' that carbon over the life of the products."

Not all equal

While the demand for eco-friendly products, including bamboo flooring, continues to grow, salespeople can educate their customers by underscoring that not all bamboo flooring is created equal.

"In order to ensure a beautiful, durable and renewable product," Knight commented, "it's important to know where, and especially when, the bamboo was harvested, what species were used, how hard it is on the Janka ball scale, adhesive formaldehyde off-gassing ratings, and whether it is coming from a reputable manufacturer and is truly environmentally friendly."

According to Robert Pearson, manager of technical and customer services for Hawa Bamboo Flooring, when it comes to using bamboo for flooring, the older plants are passed by and usually go for furniture but never flooring. By cutting at the four to six year growth cycle "these younger bamboo fields are planted and re-planted for this use only, thereby not affecting any other bamboo growth in the area.

"When customers are interested in a floor," he explained, "it is the responsibility of the salesman to give out as much information pertaining to the benefits of bamboo over other species. They need to be knowledgeable and as informative as possible, but the truth matters in the selection of bamboo flooring. It need not be oversold."

Taking the LEED

While traditional bamboo floors are not recognized by the U.S. Green Building Council's

LEED rating system regarding indoor air quality (IAQ), manufacturers are working to change this.

"Although some bamboo flooring may not meet LEED's IEQ Credit 4.4: Low-Emitting Materials Credit," Knight said, "bamboo flooring manufactured using an adhesive that is not urea-based will qualify. Our company offers its LEED-Enhanced Program to meet this credit by using a manufacturing adhesive that is completely formaldehyde-free, not simply urea-free—thus allowing many of our products to qualify for two LEED credits."

At this time, Teragren bamboo products created with the formaldehyde-free adhesive must be special-ordered because of the associated adhesive costs and slower production time. The exception is the mill's patented Synergy Strand Bamboo flooring, which already qualifies for both MR6 and IEQ 4.4 LEED credits. The manufacturing process uses a phenol-based adhesive, not urea-based. Teragren is working toward the introduction of a LEED-compliant formaldehyde-free adhesive in all of its products in the near future, she added.

"Our bamboo products qualify for two LEED credits," said Keeble, "MR 6 [Rapidly Renewable Materials, EQ 4.4] [Low Emitting Materials—composite wood and laminate adhesives. The determining factor for IAQ is the quantity of noxious volatile organic components emitted from the adhesives and finishes. Our floors are produced by European manufacturers and meet the E1 standard [for IAQ], a European test method to measure formaldehyde emissions."

Non-reputable manufacturers are more likely to produce bamboo flooring that does not qualify and is generally sold at a cheaper price in the market, he explained. "These same, non-reputable companies may also use immature plants that are not as durable as mature bamboo. We only use mature bamboo stands from managed forests or plantations."

Pearson noted most bamboo products are tested under specifications and certifications at the company's factories in China. "The United States does not seem to do this here. It would make it more acceptable to consumers if it was USA-certified."



As the available choices in bamboo increase, designers and specifiers alike are using the flooring for commercial applications. This offering from U.S. Floors, shown here in pecan, is an ideal choice for an office setting.

Popular trends, colors

On what is currently hot, Keeble noted stained and hand-scraped bamboo is very popular right now. "We offer a wide variety of these products. They offer a visual similar to stained exotic species. Strand woven bamboo is also an emerging trend due to its high density (2900 Janka), which makes it suitable for heavy commercial use. The grain is closer to a traditional hardwood floor than is traditional vertical or horizontal bamboo."

Pearson agreed, saying, right now, carbonized horizontal bamboo and black stained are the most popular products Hawa has. "The colors tend to be dark rather than natural bamboo, which is yellow in its tones. The darker color product blends with lighter color interiors of houses.

Following with the theme that darker is hot, comes Sambuca Bamboo from the Ty Pennington Collection. Named for the popular host of TV's "Extreme Makeover: Home Edition", the collection, available at Lumber Liquidators, is produced from old growth bamboo reeds that are at least four years old, thereby increasing hardness, noted a company spokeswoman. "The collection, which comes with a 30-year warranty, creates a naturally beautiful and ecologically friendly product that evokes a

feeling of luxury."

For Teragren, "the Synergy Strand Bamboo Flooring in narrow and wide plank is our most popular product line," Knight said. "A beautiful, renewable and durable product that is created through a patented manufacturing process that fuses together bamboo strands with an environmentally safe adhesive, Synergy is 18% harder than Santos mahogany and 100% harder than red oak—and is manufactured according to stringent U.S. and European environmental standards.

"Synergy Java (a mixture of light and dark caramelized strands) and Chestnut (caramelized color) are our most popular colors," she added. "We also anticipate that our newest color, Brindle (an exotic blend of natural and caramelized strands) will be a popular seller this fall—it was well-received at Surfaces."

Synergy products are particularly popular because of their durability and because they are perfect for high-traffic commercial and residential installations, concluded Knight. "Additionally, our Signature Naturals solid strip bamboo flooring in Vertical Grain Caramelized is also very popular, as the quiet beauty of Signature Naturals lends simple elegance to a variety of décor styles from traditional to contemporary."