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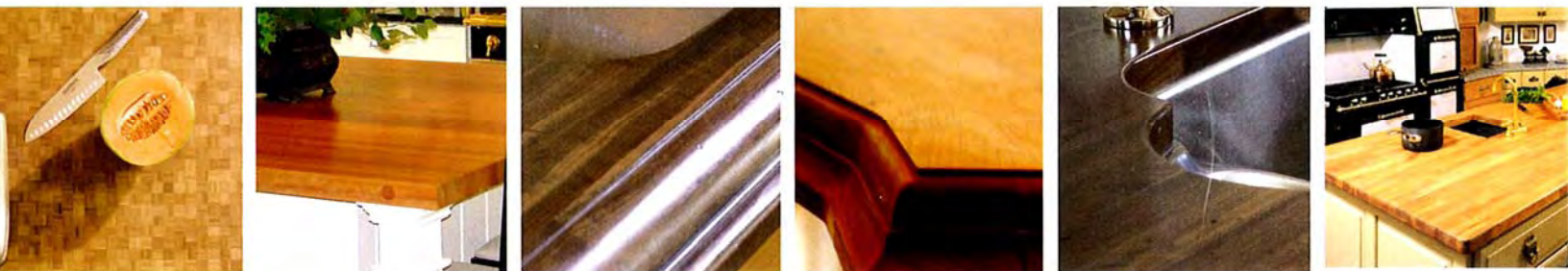
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Nature's Best

Need warmth? Try a wood countertop for a change...



Before and after World War II, the rich, inviting presence of a hardwood countertop graced the kitchens of homes throughout the United States, according to Ken Williamson, CKD, owner of Craft-Art in Atlanta. Because wood countertops in the 1970s were sealed improperly, however, they stained easily, creating eyesores as more and more kitchens were moved toward the center of the home. With the emergence of easy-to-maintain natural stone and laminate surfaces, the demand for countertops made of wood dramatically decreased. "The design community wanted something strong and durable," said Williamson. "You can't have an ugly countertop in the center of the house."

But in recent years, with advances in water-resistant sealing and stain-resistant finishes, hardwood countertops have regained popularity, offering a warm, relaxing and country-like feeling to the kitchen. While most kitchen cabinets and flooring are made of hardwood, a wooden countertop can provide a genuine sense of balance to the space. "Wood countertops create an attractive contrast and add warmth to the kitchen, which isn't always possible with stone," said designer Ronna Duffy, of North Shore Kitchens Plus, Inc. in Marblehead, MA. "They give the kitchen a furniture look by adding character, detail and variety."

While stone will continue to dominate the market, the recent draw to wood countertops suggests that certain misconceptions about them have been dispelled. No longer susceptible to stains, wood countertops are also easier to cut and install than natural stone. Another common misunderstanding is that they accumulate bacteria, which "has been debunked," Williamson said. "Food never comes into contact with the wood itself. The surface is easy to clean and disinfect. Any top that is not cleaned or disinfected will attract bacterial growth."

The upkeep of wood countertops, though different from that of other surfaces, is fairly easy to perform. For instance, Craft-Art countertops require a homemade vinegar and water solution for daily cleaning and disinfecting. In addition, they should be recoated once a year with Waterlox finish to maintain their durability and add sparkle. "People are unaware that wood countertops can make a suitable kitchen surface," said Mark T. White, CKD, owner of Kitchen Encounters in Annapolis, MD. "But it's important to establish realistic expectations with a client. I always tell my clients that wood countertops require more maintenance than a slab of stone."

In addition to providing a soft transition from the kitchen to an adjacent furnished room, hardwood countertops offer other opportunities to enhance a space. For example, White enjoys their thickness, which can range from 2¹/₄ in. to 3 in. By contrast, granite and quartz countertops are usually 1¹/₄ in. "Having an opportunity to do something thicker helps highlight and differentiate the countertop even more," he said. "Now, you can install a sink in the top."

While maple butcher block was the wood countertop of choice in the '70s, manufacturers today are offering a wider range of species, the most popular of which are teak, cherry, walnut and oak. Tigerwood is highly sought after for its exotic quality, while eco-friendly materials, such as bamboo, are also slowly gaining ground. "Bamboo has a very unusual look and unique texture," said Duffy. "It's also durable."

With so many options available and maintenance no longer a problem, today's wood countertops have outgrown their unattractive past to earn a place in any kitchen. ■

—Matthew Marin



[1]



[2]



[4]



[3]



[5]

(1) Brooks Custom's solid Black Cherry wood countertop is 3 in. thick with a large-format ogee edge and space for an undermount farm sink, offering a traditional aesthetic to any kitchen. Guaranteed to last decades without recoating, this surface is sealed with a marine oil waterproof finish. Circle No. 200 **(2)** The warm, inviting tones of Michigan Maple Block Company's Wood Welded solid northern maple butcher block can make a kitchen island the centerpiece of the room. Kiln-dried maple strips are glued together to make this countertop, and it is finished with an environmentally sensitive durable, water-resistant finish. Circle No. 201 **(3)** Made of thick wooden slabs that are formed by bonding together strips of unpainted hardwood, Reico offers Butcher Block Lyptus countertops, created by using wood from Eucalyptus trees that are grown in Brazil's national sustainable forestry standard. Additionally, Lyptus countertops often come sealed with a natural finish of rosemary, lemon and beeswax. Circle No. 202 **(4)** Bringing a subtle parquet pattern of end-grain bamboo into the kitchen, Teragren's Bamboo Parquet Butcher Block is available in natural and caramelized colors that are manufactured in standard sizes with a formaldehyde-free and food-safe adhesive. Sealing with a penetrating finish on all sides is necessary to maintain proper moisture balance. Circle No. 203 **(5)** One of Craft-Art's top-selling products, the American black walnut countertop offers warmth to any kitchen. The company finishes each top with Waterlox, an organic tung oil based varnish that penetrates into the wood fibers to create a permanent finish that will not crack, chip or peel. Circle No. 204