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Home Improvement: Choosing a Kitchen Countertop

Get the pros, cons and costs for nine popular surface options

By [Scott Gibson](#) Posted May 06, 2010 from [Kitchens and Baths](#)

Choosing a countertop is a big decision: Not only does it contribute to the design tone of the room, but it needs to be a workhorse for food prep, cleanup and that school science project due in the morning. Plus, it's a big investment, since any material that can stand up to food, liquid, high heat and frequent use is almost guaranteed to be pricey. Before deciding on a new countertop for a kitchen remodel, consider your budget constraints and lifestyle. There are many countertops to choose from, including the old standbys of plastic laminate or stone, as well as new **eco-friendly products** aimed at the green building market.

Stone and Engineered Stone

Durable and beautiful, granite accounted for about 15 percent of countertops in new homes in 2001 but jumped to 48 percent by 2008, according to the National Association of Home Builders Research Center. The classic look of stone can be expensive, especially with decorative edges. One way to cut the bill is to use a common color with a simple eased edge in perimeter work areas and save the expensive slab and edge for a center island or peninsula, suggests interior designer and author Debbie Wiener of Silver Spring, Maryland. Another possibility is to use remnant pieces.

"If your heart is set on granite or any other stone, but cost is a factor, go to several shops in your area and look at what the supplier has left over," she says. "Sometimes you can find two leftover slabs that match well. You'll save a ton of money that way."

An alternative to granite or other stones is engineered stone, a mix of quartz chips and resin. It's stain-resistant, with a mottled surface that hides smudges or fingerprints, and it's often less expensive than natural stone.

Laminate and Solid Surface

High-pressure laminate is one of the best bargains in the **kitchen**. It comes in just about any solid color imaginable and a variety of patterns and textures, including some that realistically mimic stone or wood. Creative edge treatments can give it a more decorative feel, and "post-formed" laminate comes with an integral backsplash and rounded front edge. Laminate can be fabricated on site or in the installer's shop, and it is highly stain-resistant, easy to maintain and, with care, will last for many years. But heat and sharp knives can damage it, and the surface can't be repaired.

Another type of plastic is generically called "solid surface." DuPont's Corian was the first, but there are now many others on the market. It consists of polyester or acrylic resin and a mineral filler. Like plastic laminate, it comes in many colors and patterns and is highly stain-resistant. Solid surface is more expensive than laminate, but it has two advantages: Minor surface damage can be sanded out, and it can be installed with integral sinks and backsplashes that eliminate food-collecting seams.

Tile and Concrete

Although they're very different, both tile and concrete offer unrivaled design flexibility. Concrete comes in just about any color imaginable, and can be molded into any size and shape. Concrete is extremely durable, although susceptible to hairline cracks. It also will stain if it's not sealed periodically. It's on the pricey side, but its design possibilities are truly unique.

Tile can't be manipulated as easily, but mixing colors and textures can produce striking countertops. It can be cut into virtually any shape; large tiles can be offset by mosaics, or machine-made field tile can be complemented by hand-cast works of art. Ceramic tile is highly heat- and stain-resistant, and damaged tiles can be replaced. Its major weakness is the grout between tiles: This should be sealed regularly to keep it from staining or getting moldy. Basic tile counters are reasonably priced and skilled installers are easy to find.

Wood and Bamboo

Wood countertops have a homey feel and take wear and tear gracefully. The best species for countertops are close-grained species like maple. Open-grained woods, such as oak, are not as well suited because they collect **food** and grime more readily.

A butcher block is a popular style of wood countertop, but wider planks can also be glued together to form counters of any width. Wood takes moderate heat well, and signs of wear, like knife marks, can be sanded out. Wood's biggest downfall is susceptibility to water stains and decay, so it should be well sealed, particularly around sinks.

Though not technically a wood, bamboo shares many of the same attributes. Because it is made of a renewable fiber, it is a good option for the eco-conscious consumer. The market for bamboo countertops is expanding, with companies like Teragren offering increased design options.

Stainless Steel

Most commercial **kitchens** have stainless steel counters, and there's a reason for that: It's highly resistant to the punishment cooks throw at it. Stainless steel doesn't absorb food, making it easier to keep sanitary, and with use it develops a maze of very fine scratches that give it a pleasant luster. Plus, countertops can be made with integral sinks and backsplashes, so they're easier to keep clean.

The downside of stainless steel is that it's fabricated by specialized shops, so it's more expensive. Despite its practicality, some feel it has a cold look.

Recycled Materials

A number of manufacturers offer surfaces made with recycled material, including glass, paper and even aluminum. Many of them are created by mixing resin with post-consumer or postindustrial scrap. The finished product is typically durable and stain-resistant, and damaged areas can be buffed out.

Recycled counters can be eye-catching. Metal and recycled glass counters, such as Alkemi, IceStone and EnviroGLAS, boast vibrant colors. Paperstone and Richlite, two recycled paper counters, appear more muted, but are extremely tough. These relatively new products are attractive options for homes built to green standards.