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What's Hot in Countertops

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Materials are available to blend into the overall style of any room

The countertop is one of the most used surfaces in the home. Therefore the material should be hard-wearing and low-maintenance for today's busy homeowners. So let's examine some of the strengths and weaknesses of popular countertop choices and new options.

Natural stone

Natural stone has been gracing homes for decades. Understanding how the stone is classified provides insight into the expectations of performance.

Granite is the most popular countertop especially for kitchens and comes in colors and patterns that are endless. Soapstone, generally smooth and dark gray in color, is an exceptional choice for countertops, backsplashes and sinks with drain boards. When it comes to marble, hardness and suitability vary. Marble is easily stained with liquids or oils and can be etched with prolonged contact with citrus products.

Natural sandstone is an extremely hard and tough material. It is quartz-based, with each stone having a different level of porosity, hardness and compressive strength. Because sandstone is more porous than other natural stones, it is more likely to stain and absorb moisture.

Quartz

Quartz surfacing is stronger than granite with a minimum of 93 percent mined quartz (the gemstone of granite) with the balance in proprietary polymers. The patterns are controlled and consistent with uniform colors or veined to emulate movement. The homogeneous structure is nonporous, stain-resistant and never needs sealing. This sanitary surface will not promote the growth of mold, mildew or bacteria if properly cleaned.

Solid surface

Solid surface countertops are versatile with limitless design possibilities. The material works like wood and can be crafted and shaped in ways that are not possible with other materials. The seams are inconspicuous and solid surface bowls are integral. Some manufacturers are using at least 12 percent preconsumer recycled materials, and imperfect sheets may be utilized as a regrind material to make specific colors. Surfaces can be periodically renewed through a minimally invasive sanding and buffing process.

Laminate

Laminate countertops are still the most cost-effective solution with unlimited colors, textures and patterns that can be successfully laminated to both fabrics and plastics. Many laminates are environmentally friendly using recycled plastics/laminates and avoid urea formaldehyde in the manufacturing. New techniques allow for undermounting sinks and lavs. Laminates are sanitary and will not support mold or bacteria growth.

Glass

Glass can be compared to granite in strength, scratch resistance, heat resistance, durability and maintenance. Available in custom solid sheets, multidimensional patterns can be etched, sandblasted, grooved, melted, fused or carved into glass. A full spectrum of colors is available from light to bright with gloss or matte finishes. Though glass is usually not recommended for use as the primary work surface, it can be effectively used in tandem with other materials such as on a raised eating bar.

Wood

Wood countertops create nature-inspired warmth in popular tones such as red and medium to dark wood tones and distressed textures. Teak is used in wet areas. Sustainable woods include black walnut, several maples, red oak, white oak, black cherry and basswood. Teragren Bamboo is a popular green choice. Another more exotic sustainable option is Lyptus, a South American wood with a brown undertone appearance that darkens over time.

Maintenance requires applying mineral oil as the top dries out to keep liquids from penetrating. Wood is easy to repair as nicks and tiny dents are part of the natural patina.

Metal

Metal countertops are durable, heat-resistant and provide natural antimicrobial properties. Radius edges, coves and backsplashes are easily integrated into the countertop. Custom manufacturing can result in a seamless countertop. Bending, welding and polishing gives crisp detail. Metal countertops with the option of integral sinks and coved backsplashes can be fabricated in almost any size and configuration. The downside is that metal is noisy, may dent and should not be cut upon. Surface scratching is common. It also conducts electricity and can emit static discharge.

Stainless steel essentially is a low-carbon steel which contains chromium at 10 percent or more by weight which gives it its unique stainless, corrosion-resisting properties.

Zinc is a reactive material and will show patina changes with age. The mirror finish shows through various scratches and dings.

Pewter is a classic European countertop material used frequently on bar tops in France and Italy. It is noted for a satin sheen and distinctive color and continues to age or patinate and acquires a

unique finish reflecting the use pattern. Pewter can scratch readily but is easy to rebrush the grain unless it was fabricated with a mirror finish.

Sixteen-gauge copper is recommended for countertops. Features include rolled edges with welded corners. Copper is naturally self-renewing and an antimicrobial surface which requires no harsh chemicals for cleaning. Even after many decades of hard use, copper surfaces can easily be restored to their original luster.

Composite, recycled materials

Composite and recycled materials have entered the market as eco-friendly solutions. Three categories are leading the charge.

Recycled paper countertops are durable and natural-looking with an appearance similar to stone. Composed of 50 to 100 percent paper pulp from post-consumer recycled paper combined with resins, most of these surfaces use no synthetic or petroleum products. The countertop is stain-resistant to most household cleaners and food, scratch-resistant and may be heat-resistant to 350 degrees F. The material is easily repairable.

Recycled glass countertops may use ground-up bottles and concrete held together with either cement or resin. Others use recycled glass and porcelain. Attributes can include strength, scratch resistance, thermal resistance and high durability. If not cleaned up right away, acids like red wine, lemon juice and vinegar can etch the matrix of the surface and foods such as coffee and tea can leave stains.

Recycled aluminum countertops are beautiful and durable. They are available in standard sizes or in tiles. Multiple colors allow for mixing and matching. Built-in features include front wrap, side wrap and backsplashes.

Countertops can take an average kitchen or bathroom and transform it into a showcase. Countertop materials and design should blend into the overall style of the room. Mixing countertop materials in different areas of the room, such as stone and glass or quartz and stainless steel, can be effective. The designer who has a clear grasp on the attributes and specific applications of various countertop materials will be most successful with these combinations.