

SMART CHOICE

## Covering all the bases

When buying new flooring, factors such as foot traffic in the room, green certification, and the installer all make a difference

By Consumer Reports | August 1, 2010

Laminate and vinyl flooring win over wood when it comes to resisting everyday wear, according to Consumer Reports. But its most recent tests of almost 30 products offer more reasons to spring for oak and other natural flooring.

CR put a cross section of major brands through torture tests of scuffs, scrapes, spills, and other kitchen abuse. Bruce Dundee Plank, a prefinished solid-oak flooring, is the first hardwood to score Excellent in its wear tests. At \$5.70 per square foot, it's also roughly half the price of the \$11 Mirage Brazilian Cherry, which showed signs of wear more quickly.

You will also find bamboo that lasts longer than earlier versions that were tested. Stranding — shredding bamboo into fibers and compressing them for strength — helped Eco-Timber Woven Honey (\$5.75 per square foot) and Teragren Synergy (\$6) earn top ratings for solid and engineered flooring. Adhesives with lower emissions are another plus for stranded products. What's more, predarkening and other treatments make today's bamboo better at resisting color change in sunny rooms.

CR also found a winner among linoleum floors, which blend linseed oil and tree bark without killing the tree. Armstrong Marmorette, \$4.50 per square foot, is the highest-scoring linoleum in CR's tests. As for flooring made from reclaimed wood, you might want to think twice: Two products, Woods Co.'s Antique Oak (\$8) and Duluth Timber's Douglas Fir (\$11), ranked lowest in CR's tests.

### How to Choose

Home centers and retailers such as [iFloor.com](http://iFloor.com) and Lumber Liquidators run frequent promotions on specific types and brands, especially on hardwoods and laminates, at discounts of up to 25 percent. Here's what else to think about as you shop:

**Gauge the traffic:** Consider products that aced CR's tests for wear and scratches, including the plastic-laminate Armstrong Coastal Living, for areas that get lots of traffic. Concerned about dropped forks and plates? The Nafco PermaStone vinyl, a CR [Best Buy](#) at \$3.90 per square foot, stood up to a barrage of dropped weights and should fare better in busy kitchens.

**Decide who does the work:** Homeowners install roughly half of all flooring. You can also get by without a pro for some repairs. Floors that lock together and float without nails or glue, including engineered wood and plastic laminate, are usually easier to install than solid wood. Easier still are vinyl or linoleum planks and tiles, which require less work than sheets.

**Be sure it's really green:** Certification by the Forest Stewardship Council and Sustainable Forestry Initiative offers some assurance that wood flooring comes from responsibly managed forests. See that both the product and the manufacturer have been certified. Vinyl flooring certified by the industry's FloorScore program meets California's tough emission standards for volatile organic compounds, which have been linked to health problems and pollution. It also qualifies for Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design credit from the independent US Green Building Council. But with vinyl floors there are other concerns, such as phthalate exposure and manufacturing and disposal problems.

*Consumer Reports writes columns, reviews, and ratings on cars, appliances, electronics, and other consumer goods. Previous stories can be found at [consumerreports.org](http://consumerreports.org). ■*