



November 2, 2009

BAMBOO FLOORING BASICS

Bamboo has become a very popular green material lately. The fast-growing grass (that's right—not wood!) has garnered much green cred for growing so quickly—it can be harvested after growing for just 4 or 5 years—and is often grown without the need for pesticides, and can regenerate without seeding. Flooring is one of its more popular uses.

PROS OF BAMBOO FLOORING

Bamboo flooring is a dense and durable material, so it will wear well and perform like oak or maple hardwood. Because it's so dense, it usually doesn't require refinishing quite as often as hardwood. And, because it is usually milled like hardwood—with a tongue-and-groove on all four sides—it doesn't require any special installation techniques.

It comes in a few finishes—usually a natural blonde, and a carbonized amber—and, because neither is a surface stain (the carbonized finish comes from pressure-cooking the bamboo), the flooring retains even color over time, even after sanding.

CONS OF BAMBOO FLOORING

Though it's often milled into floorboards similar to hardwood, bamboo flooring can't be installed with a standard flooring nailer, so you'll have to use a pneumatic flooring nailer instead. Since the carbonized finish comes from pressure-cooking the bamboo, further breaking down the fibers in the material, the darker finish weakens the final product. Early harvesting, at three years, for instance, instead of five years, also makes for a weaker product.

Then there is the green aspect to consider; most bamboo comes from at least halfway around the world, and, unless care is taken to source it responsibly, its quality or sustainability cannot be guaranteed. There's also a fairly extensive production process to get it from round, hollow shoots to flat boards, which adds to the material's footprint.

HOW GREEN IS BAMBOO FLOORING?

Fortunately or unfortunately, the quality and relative green-ness of bamboo flooring varies wildly. Much of the world's bamboo comes from China, where its cultivation and harvest are largely unregulated, and many so-called certifications can be bought and sold.

As such, despite bamboo's deserved reputation as a green material, the only real way to ensure that you're getting bamboo flooring whose production isn't tearing apart the landscape halfway around the world is to find flooring stamped with a reputable certification; the one we trust the most is the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC).

Because the finished product is laminated and glued together, the adhesive used also has to be considered. Many manufacturers use urea-formaldehyde (UF) adhesive, which emits volatile organic compounds and is harmful to indoor air quality.

WHERE TO GET BAMBOO FLOORING

Bamboo flooring has become very popular, and is available in many places where flooring and building materials are sold. There are a handful of manufacturers that are greener choices:

[Smith & Fong Plyboo—FSC certified](#)
[Teragren](#)
[Ecotimber](#)

WHERE DO I USE IT?

Bamboo flooring can be used anywhere you'd use hardwood or laminate flooring; it is ideal for the kitchen and other high-traffic areas, though be careful about using it in areas that might have lots of moisture, as it's very susceptible to warping.

WHAT DOES IT COST?

Price per square foot ranges from about \$5 to \$10 per square foot—about the same as sustainably-sourced domestic hardwoods.

BAMBOO INSTALLATION TIPS

The milled floorboards—similar to hardwood—can be installed in a day or so, depending on the size of the project. Since installation can't be done with a standard flooring nailer, it may require slightly more time to complete installation from start to finish. Though it can be installed by handy homeowners, it's usually best to have a professional at least consult on the job.

The floating, click-together laminate version can quickly and easily be installed yourself. You'll be able to read more about this in our upcoming guide to engineered flooring.