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Bamboo flooring: An Overview

By Nick Bajzek, Products Editor

Some see bamboo as an eco-friendly source that can provide a virtually limitless supply of beautiful flooring. Others say it creates an easily-marred and carbon-intensive product of little use to high-traffic homes. But what's the bottom line: is bamboo a good choice?

Interior decorator Steven Patrick's clients have mixed reactions to bamboo. They like that it's a renewable resource and is harder than other woods. They don't like that furniture, high heels or heavy objects can easily mar and damage a bamboo floor.

A green product

Bamboo's rise as a premier flooring product can be largely attributed to the fact that it's a rapidly renewable resource. Bamboo is a type of grass that reaches maturity in about three to five years, whereas oak trees can take 120 years to grow to full maturity. The bamboo plant also regenerates and, when left to its own devices, requires minimal fertilization or pesticides. Bamboo floors are also naturally water repellent.

David Knight, CEO of bamboo flooring manufacturer Teragren, estimates that 95 percent of bamboo flooring today is the Moso species, which is mostly grown in China. Other bamboo might come from Central and South American or even Vietnam. Teragren recently unveiled its latest boards, which can help builders attain LEED points.

Quality

Knight says builders and contractors must objectively look at the price of bamboo; you mostly get what you pay for, he says, adding that not all manufacturers



It looks good, but do your buyers understand they can damage the bamboo planks? The fact bamboo regenerates in its natural surroundings isn't the only factor to consider.

import their bamboo from the same sustainable sources or produce boards in ISO-certified facilities.

Color is equally telling. Knight notes that bamboo flooring gets its color from a process called carbonization in which bamboo is steamed under controlled pressure and temperature. As the bio-organisms and sugar breaks down, the color of the material changes into varying shades of brown. This, in turn, can weaken the structural integrity and overall hardness. The name "solid bamboo" doesn't help, either, and can be misleading. Natural and carbonized bamboo floors are often referred to as solid bamboo even though it's layered, similar to plywood.

Founder Dan Smith from Smith & Fong flooring agrees builders and buyers should pay strict attention to the color. "From empirical experience, the darker, amber color will be softer because of the heat process. The natural color is invariably the best. The flat grain, not the edge grain, will produce the hardest boards," he says.

Smith says that Smith & Fong's Plyboo product is the only bamboo flooring provider that's FSC-Certified right now. That means there's minimal, if any, need to use pesticides, says Smith.

"It's really more of a matter of appropriate application than anything," says Knight. "If you use a softer wood from who knows where in a high traffic area, well, yeah, you might not be satisfied with its performance."