



12 Things You Need To Know When Buying Laminate Flooring

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LAMINATE FLOORING

Laminate flooring is an innovative and ever-evolving style of floor covering. In the 21st century, it has gone far beyond where it started as a secondary product in the countertops industry. Making a decision to buy laminate flooring takes in the need for a surface that looks great, is relatively straightforward to install, and will last a long time as well. That takes in the basic goals of buying any kind of home improvement product, of course.

But, with any major purchase like this, there are some specific things to know about and keep in mind when buying laminate flooring. Here's a list of 12 important, and even vital areas of concern to be aware of when you're making your decision to buy a laminate floor. Here they are.

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Buying any floor is more than a simple one-off purchase. It's an investment in your property. So with that in mind, let's take a look at each area outlined on the list to see why they are so important to know about as you make your purchase, and how to go about narrowing down your options with your chosen vendors and installation professionals. And that leads nicely into the first area on the list...

DIY OR PROFESSIONAL CONTRACTOR?

1

This may be one you've already decided upon by now. But, just in case you haven't or are still deciding, consider these points. On the DIY side, there are definite advantages when approaching an installation project that you can do yourself. For one thing, laminate flooring has been made to be friendly to the DIYer who has the tools, some level of comfort around them, and someone who loves to be hands-on when it comes to home improvement. It's also a way to save on the cost of hiring a professional. If this description of a competent DIYer is one you can identify with, then this may be the way to go.

But, sometimes hiring a professional can save you money, too. This is particularly true if the above does NOT describe you. Also, professionals tend to be able to get faster results without sacrificing on quality, and without unnecessary wastage, which can be a drain on your budget. That's why they are professionals, after all. They also tend to have the right tools for the job, which you may or may not have to hand. And that point brings us very handily to the next item on the list...

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YOUR TOOLS

2

For every job, there are important tools to tackle it. Here's a very basic list of what you need to have on hand for a laminate floor installation.

- Box cutter
- Levels
- Table saw for cutting laminate flooring boards
- Door-jamb saw
- Jigsaw or scroll saw (for irregular shapes in your space, if any)
- A well-ventilated, easily accessed space to do the sawing
- Safety equipment; goggles, knee-pads, dust-mask
- Measuring tools; square, measuring tape, pencil
- Tapping block, pull-bar, and hammer
- Spacers
- Painter's tape

Most seasoned DIYers can check each of these off the list. A professional laminate flooring installer will have these as a matter of course. For those who are seasoned DIYers, but don't have some of the power tools listed here, they can generally be rented. Pull-bars, tapping blocks, and spacers can be purchased in kits. But, if any of these items (particularly the power tools) gives you pause as far as your comfort and experience is concerned, then a contractor is probably the best course of action.

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YOUR SUBFLOOR

3

The surface over which you'll be installing laminate flooring is vital to the success of the project, and to the enjoyment of your floor over time. So, it's important to know a few important things about your subfloor, and be able to make adjustments as needed before you start laying out the boards. Here are the things to ensure when it comes to your subfloor:

- **It's clean.** Dirt, dust, and generally sticky substances on your subfloor can affect the stability of the boards. So, power washing and sweeping is your best bet to make sure your subfloor is clean.
- **It's level.** Uneven surfaces make for unstable flooring installations. If your subfloor is uneven, this is a project to take on before a flooring installation. Leveling a subfloor can take many forms depending on what kind of surface it is. When in doubt, seek the advice of the professionals
- **It's dry.** You can measure this pretty simply by renting or buying a moisture meter. This is important when it comes to concrete slabs that are relatively new, or making sure the subfloor is dry after you've power washed it. But overall, it's best to make sure that the moisture levels are not above 1% relative humidity over any point in your subfloor after multiple readings.

Also to note, every single laminate floor you will look at will need an underlay, which is sold by the roll and designed to be a buffer layer between your subfloor and your boards. Part of the role of the underlay is to help to even out the subfloor a bit for a more stable installation. But, moisture is going to be another area that a quality underlay will help to control.

Ask your chosen vendor which underlay for laminate they have on offer to go over your specific subfloor. Tell them about the type of subfloor you have, where it is, common moisture levels found in the space, and about noise levels too. Some underlay is even designed to help reduce the sound of footfalls. Depending on your space, that could come in handy!

THE AC RATING

4

The AC rating is a laminate flooring-specific measurement for surface abrasion that will help you choose the right kind of laminate flooring for the space you've got in mind. If you're installing laminate flooring in a general residential space, AC3 is a good base rating to start your search, although if you're installing a laminate floor in an area with less traffic than a hallway, or busy family room, an AC2

rating can serve you in specialized spaces like guest rooms, and bedrooms.

If you've got pets and kids, then you may or may not want to think about an AC4 or higher for that extra layer of protection. But, for the most part, an AC3 rated floor is suitable for every day wear in the average household.

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BOARD THICKNESS

5

Laminate floor board thickness can vary from 3mm to 15mm, with a median thickness of about 8mm. The cost scale tends to slide upward in relation to how thick the boards are. The advantage of a thicker board has to do with how it feels underfoot, and whether it is more or less comparable to a real wood floor. A lot of the time, this is the reason that laminate floors are chosen in the first place; because they look like hardwood, for instance. Thicker boards help to support that by making them feel like real wood, too.

But, there are issues of impact-resistance and sound reduction when it comes to thicker boards. Generally speaking, the thicker the board, the less likely it is to be subject to damage via falling objects. It also absorbs more sound, which makes walking on it slightly less noisy with the help of a good underlay. Also, thicker boards are easier to cut without damage to the board itself. This can make for a faster and more efficient installation all around. These are minor points, maybe. But, the little things are often the ones we notice the most. Roughly speaking, the thicker the board, the sturdier it is. It's a good thing to consider, as you adjust your expectations according to your budget.

LOCKING SYSTEM

6

Hitting on that point about easier installation, a good locking system can make all the difference. Most of the quality laminate flooring products you will encounter will feature a "glueless" locking system. This means that the tongue in groove element in each board is designed to lock and to hold without the necessary use of white carpenter's glue, although many installers add glue for extra hold.

There are a number of locking systems out there attached to different lines of laminate flooring. Uniclic, 5G, and

EasyLock are all common and reputable designs for laminate floor locking systems. They are designed to lock and hold for the long-term without "slippage". If this aspect of the product you're interested in isn't clear, the matter of a licensed locking system is a good conversation to start with your vendor. And the details of the locking system should be included in the installation instructions, your warranty information, or both.

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THE CORE LAYER

7

The core layer is the meat in the laminate floor board sandwich, being the middle layer between the image layer on the top, and the backing layer on the bottom. It's the layer of laminate flooring that will allow your floor to adapt to expansion and contraction in your space according to moisture and temperature levels. The most common core layers are derived from MDF (medium-density fiberboard) and HDF (high-density fiberboard). Fiberboard is a mixture of compressed wood dust and resins that make for a material that is designed to be stable and to resist impact.

Generally speaking, an HDF core adds a few cents to the pricing of a laminate product. This is because HDF is denser by definition, allowing for more resistance to wear, and greater impact absorption. Some laminate products that use MDF can still be worthy of your attention, because their levels of durability are accounted for in their AC rating, or wear layers. But, if it's down to a choice of MDF vs HDF, it's better to go with HDF, even if you're spending slightly more per square foot.

EDGE STYLE

8

Laminate flooring has grown more and more varied in terms of styles. This is true of surface styles most dramatically. But, it also applies to edge styles that have a more subtle effect on how your installed floor will look. Again, it's the subtleties that can have a noticeable impact. So, when shopping for laminate flooring, consider the edge style.

Straight-edge laminate flooring has each edge cut at a 90° angle, which makes for a more continuous and

uninterrupted surface once the boards are installed. Beveled edge or micro-beveled edges allow a viewer to see the seams between the boards, creating distinct lines. This is because the edges are cut on a slight angle. So, if you hold them in profile, the points where the boards meet form a "v". French bleed edges show those lines in even greater relief, with stained lines in between each board surface. Much like your choice of color or texture, edge style is really down to your taste. But, it's a good idea to know your options.



SURFACE EFFECTS

9

Laminate floors have really come a long way in this department. There are so, so many effects that you can gain in a modern laminate product, from detailed wood grains to the varied patterning of stone tile. And even within those subsets of products, you can get the same effects that are available in natural products, even if the process to create them is completely different.

For example, you can buy “handscraped” laminate floors. It’s not possible to scrape the surfaces of laminate floors to get that same effect you’d see in a real wood floor.

But, through an extrusion process, you can get that grooved and contoured style you’ll see in a hardwood floor, even if it was created on a factory line. The same goes for “wire brushed” effects. Beyond that, “piano finish” laminate floors imitate the high polish of high-end wood. “Embossed in registration” laminates match photographed grain patterns with pressed textures for a higher level of accuracy when they’re compared to real wood. This is not to mention laminate tiles and planks that imitate stone surfaces, and ceramic tile. You’ve got options!

ACCESSORIES

10

Some laminate flooring accessories you’ll need to consider have to do with the look of a completed space. Others have to do with performance and the health of your chosen laminate floor. Finishing pieces like baseboards, quarter rounds for walls, and T-molds and other transition pieces will add a tailored and refined appearance between one space and another. When you’re shopping, think about how the space where you’re installing laminate flooring will flow into another space. This can help you figure out the kinds of finishing pieces you’ll need.

But, as to the long-term health of your floor, underlay to account for sound dampening and subtle levelling

effects, vapor barriers to manage moisture from your subfloor, and under-floor heating (depending on the compatibility of your chosen product, of course...) are all important considerations as well. You are the best judge of what you’re going to need in addition to your laminate flooring boards. But, it’s best to think about your project in a specific context, and how to support your laminate flooring within that context. Once you’ve done that, a list of important accessories tends to form pretty clearly. Of course, when in doubt, talk to your vendor, your chosen installer, or both. And as mentioned above, be sure and talk about the right kind of underlay for your specific situation.



ACCLIMATION

11

This is something that happens after your laminate flooring has been delivered. But, it's best to plan for this important aspect of an installation as you're placing your order. Acclimation is a process that takes time, sometimes 72 hours or longer, in which your laminate boards are left in your space prior to installation. During this period, your laminate boards will expand and contract accordingly, adjusting to their new surroundings. This is due to the fibrous content in the boards themselves that react to their environment. Acclimation allows for a more stable set of boards, and therefore a more stable installation when it's time to start the job.

Why is this important to know even before you buy? Because it will affect your timeline for your project, since it is a necessity for long-term success. It's important to factor in the time required for the acclimation process as you arrange for delivery. It will have an impact on when your contractor arrives, for when your rented tools are on site, and any number of other things related to managing the time it will take to complete your project. Ask about the recommended acclimation period for your specific product. Skipping the acclimation process is never an option if you're looking to get the results you want in the long term.

POST-PURCHASE SUPPORT

12

This is the final item on the list of things to know when you buy laminate flooring, but it's no less important than anything else you've read so far. One thing about making a purchase like this is that it can be a bit scary, especially if you've never done it before. And most people don't do it often. Here's the part where we're hoping that when it comes to choosing a partner for your project, you'll choose BuildDirect. Because an important aspect of making this purchasing decision is making sure that after the materials are delivered, you're not left on your own when you have more questions, or when situations arise that require the advice of experts.

Ask your vendor about warranties. Ask them about what happens if there is an issue with the shipment. Ask them

about returns and under which conditions you can send materials back for replacement if necessary should they be damaged in transit. Ask them about other kinds of support that may include help with answering common questions about the product they've sold you. Ask them about follow up orders for any accessories you may have forgotten to order. A reputable vendor will not cut you off after you've paid for your order. And be sure and do the same thing for any installation professionals you hire. The best ones out there will set aside a portion of budget for call-backs if there are circumstances surrounding the installation that require their attention. You don't have to go it alone after you've laid down your money. The true experts always want you to succeed, even after they've been paid.

WHAT IF I DON'T KNOW WHAT I DON'T KNOW?

As stated above, most reputable vendors of home improvement and home renovation materials will be willing to answer whatever questions you might have when you're in the process of buying laminate flooring. If it's your first time making a purchase like this, it's a pretty common situation that you might not know which questions you should be asking. We hope that this guide has helped you with some of them.

But, even if this guide does help you, feel free to ask questions of our product experts that are specific to your project. Because another important thing to know when you buy laminate flooring is that creating a dialogue with your chosen vendor is the first step to success.

If you have more questions about buying laminate flooring, please [send an email to our laminate flooring experts](#).

Otherwise, good luck with your project and enjoy your new space!

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