



# HOW TO CHOOSE WOOD FLOORING

## A BEGINNER'S GUIDE

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# WOOD FLOORING

It's been around a long time. And there's a reason it's still a go-to surface in the 21st century.

Wood flooring is among the most enduring choices of flooring there is, and it's never really gone out of style. Wood floors provide a great balance when it comes to performance, and to how it makes a space come to life visually. It offers unique patterns, wonderfully varied color ranges, and in many cases with a layer of structural support as well.

If you're thinking about choosing wood flooring, you're entering into a proud tradition of architectural and interior design. Before you do, there are a few things you should know. That's why this guide exists.

To start things off, here are a few general points that you should know which apply to all of the varieties of wood flooring that we'll get into detail about later on in the guide.

## WHAT YOU WILL FIND IN THIS GUIDE

This guide will talk about some of the most popular wood flooring surfaces; solid hardwood, engineered hardwood, cork, and bamboo. In each section, you'll find a brief history, with notes that will help you determine main advantages, common applications, where NOT to install them (important for any wood flooring option!), plus some notes on what is involved (or not recommended) for a DIY installation. Hopefully, this guide will be a way for you to get oriented, and to take the conversation to the next level with the product expert of your choice.

Of course, before we start all that, there are a few things that are going to be common between each option.



## A WORD ABOUT ACCLIMATION AND WOOD FLOORS

The important thing to remember with wood floors is that they are natural products; they will react to their environment by expanding and contracting according to temperature and humidity levels.

So for each example of wood flooring you'll find, it is a vital step to always acclimate your planks before you install them; let them sit in the space where they will be installed, still in their boxes. This allows the wood to expand or to contract accordingly in relation to their new environment, resulting in a more stable installation. The period for this can range from three days to a week. When you've received your materials, check your installation instructions for exact details for your specific variety of flooring.

This is kind of the wood flooring riot act when it comes to installation; never install a wood floor on the same day you receive your order. And remember too; even after you install a wood floor, it will continue to move. So, remember to always leave an expansion gap to give it a little room to do that.

## A WORD ABOUT WOOD FLOORING COLOR VARIANCE

Also, because wood floors are natural, they will not be of a uniform color. Some grades of wood flooring are established to minimize the range of colors you'll find in any one batch. But, the boards will always show a slight variance no matter what grade you've invested in. So, even if a friend of yours has maple flooring that you really love, the maple flooring you'll get for your own space may show off charms of its own, rather than be exactly like the floors your friend has. You should count this as a good thing!

And further to that, some species of wood floor will change color over time as it's exposed to light. This is called photosensitivity, to which some species of wood are more prone than others. So, there is another level of variance still to consider. Sometimes, it's best to plan for what a floor will look like later on as it matures, rather than as it looks when you first sample it. It's a great conversation to have with the wood flooring product expert helping you with your purchase.

Of course, some people love as much variance as possible. Along with every design element, a lot of this kind of thing is down to your personal taste. But, if it's absolute uniformity you're looking for, you might want to consider a laminate floor, a vinyl floor, or even a wood-grain tile floor.



## HARVESTING PRACTICES IN THE 21ST CENTURY

An important aspect of buying wood flooring in the 21st century is that the supply chain has become more savvy and precise when it comes to responsible harvesting. Even the most ambitious supplier knows that protecting the industry means protecting resources, too. That means being connected to every level of the process in the protection of each species.

FSC certified products tend to be a safe bet when it comes to choosing hardwood products. But, legislation in North America like The Lacey Act, which controls the supply chain for plants and animal imports into the United States, make it even easier for you to buy wood flooring in an ethical manner.

## HEY! WHAT ABOUT LAMINATE FLOORING?

You'll notice in this document that the entry for laminate flooring is missing. Well, it's not actually missing. It gets its own write up elsewhere. That's because with the exception for some trace elements in the core layers of the boards, laminate isn't real wood flooring. It's just made to look like it (very convincingly!) through a sophisticated manufacturing process.

To learn more about laminate flooring you'll need to consult with another guide of ours all about that unique subset of floor surfaces. We hope that clears things up for you!

## READ ON

But in saying all that, the examples of wood flooring you'll see here represents some of the most robust surfaces there are, once they're installed correctly. Here's the skinny on some of the most popular varieties of wood flooring in detail you might want to consider.

# SOLID HARDWOOD

## OVERVIEW

Hardwood flooring, and specifically “solid hardwood flooring”, has been used in architectural design and home building for centuries. Once, it was reserved to only the richest households. But, by the Twentieth-Century, it was a standard.

Solid hardwood flooring is the result of timber being cut at a sawmill, and then sent to a kiln to eliminate excess moisture. The timber is in the kiln for a specified duration depending on the species in order to make it less likely to become unstable. Warping, cupping, crowning are common results when solid hardwood flooring planks contain too much (or too little!) moisture. After kiln drying, the timber is cut into planks at a factory, and is

pretty easily recognized as the products that we know as hardwood flooring. From here, they are factory finished and/or stained. They can also be shipped out as “unfinished” planks for professionals to do the finishing/ staining on site.

Hardwood flooring installation tends to be pretty intense. Unless you are a flooring professional, or have worked extensively with one, we very strongly suggest you consider hiring an experienced installer. Mistakes and miscalculations tend to be very expensive with hardwood flooring, from incorrect cuts, to measuring errors, to sanding disasters, even to things like uneven finishing application.

## MAIN ADVANTAGES

- Extra structural strength
- Often added value to a property
- Can be refinished often
- Can be custom stained and finished (unfinished wood)

## COMMON APPLICATIONS

- Living rooms
- Hallways
- Bedrooms
- Dining areas
- Dens
- Kitchens

## INSTALLATION CONDITIONS

- On-grade or above grade for traditional installations with some more modern glue-down varieties suitable for below grade
- Environmental controls in place at all times, balanced moisture levels

## TYPE OF INSTALLATION

- Nail-down
- Glue down
- floating (some newer products)

## SUBFLOOR

- Wood, or any subfloor that will take nails
- Level, clean, and dry surfaces for any installation type

## DOING IT YOURSELF

Experience is necessary.  
Hire a professional

## COMMON VARIETIES OF SOLID HARDWOOD

Handscraping and wire-brushing are common means to create what's called 'distressed' flooring, giving your floor the look of a surface that has history. Of course, pristine boards are the preference of many as well, with a more tailored effect that communicates new beginnings, and new ideas.

As far as edge styles and plank widths, you'll see a number of options for each when you're shopping. Wide boards,

narrow boards, mixed width boards, beveled edges, square edges all offer unique visual effects. Your choice of "grade" is also going to be a deciding factor, especially when it comes to color consistency, board lengths, and "character" marks (knots, streaking, etc). Even with the strictest grading systems there is going to be some variation and character. But, this is an advantage with solid hardwood; your installation will always be unique.

## WAYS TO CHOOSE A SPECIES

Hardwood flooring is one of the most diverse natural products there is. The visual effects each option can deliver, and even the behavior of the material in your space is going to vary depending on the species you've invested in. As mentioned a bit earlier, some species will actually change color over time as it's exposed to light in a natural process called photosensitivity. Other species may reflect fewer color changes over time. But, they won't be as hard, or as stable.

Your decision on which species to buy will need to reflect what's most important to you; more consistent color, easy to cut, greater stability in specific climatic regions, and more. To help you decide this, your own space is going to be the best guide. There are some species that do better in

dry climates than others, for example. The success of your installation over time will be affected by environmental questions like temperature changes, and moisture levels in the air. When you're in discussions with product experts when it comes to species, the common conditions in your area and in your space are excellent points to put on the agenda before you buy.

And of course, if you want a certain look of one species with the performance of another, there are many fine stained hardwood products that may provide just the right option to help you get the right balance between visual effect and function.

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# ENGINEERED HARDWOOD

## OVERVIEW

Engineered hardwood flooring is like a cross between real wood floors and manufactured floors like laminate and vinyl planks. It is comprised of a real layer of hardwood flooring which is supported by a core layer of MDF or HDF (medium or high-density fiberboard) to allow it to expand and contract with changes in moisture and temperature levels.

This core layer minimizes the risk of instability – warping, cupping, and crowning – in places where solid hardwood isn't advised, such as basement locations. The core layer helps the board to adjust to temperature and moisture changes, in some cases even over a radiant heating system.

Most engineered wood floors are designed with a straightforward installation in mind. In addition to the advantage

of including a real wood floor below-grade, this is one of the reasons that engineered hardwood flooring was developed; to make it easy to include a real wood surface in a space without necessarily involving a contractor. Even if you are planning to do the installation yourself, experience with power saws is highly recommended, though. Being handy with a tape measure is also pretty vital to your success.

But, in the end, with an engineered wood floor, you get actual wood surfaces in your space without having to have a wood subfloor, without needing to use a nail gun, and with a greater level of versatility and flexibility when it comes to environmental conditions in a space.

## MAIN ADVANTAGES

- Real wood in more locations
- More options for installation than solid hardwood (floating, glue-down)
- More DIY-friendly than solid hardwood

## COMMON APPLICATIONS

- Living areas
- Hallways
- Kitchens
- Bedrooms
- Dens
- Below-grade locations like basements

## INSTALLATION CONDITIONS

- On-grade
- Above-grade
- Below grade
- Avoid excessive moisture

## TYPE OF INSTALLATION

- Staple-down
- Floating
- Glue-down

## SUBFLOOR

Any level, clean, and dry surface, including concrete slabs

## DOING IT YOURSELF

Yes - Designed to be straightforward, in a similar way to laminate flooring

## VARIETIES OF ENGINEERED WOOD FLOOR

Like solid hardwood floors, you'll have a range of options when it comes to engineered wood flooring. Some of the same surface treatments, board edge styles, and plank widths will still apply. So, if you're looking for a hand-scraped look, a wire-brushed surface, or a pristine board, then engineered wood floors offer you the same kind of selection as a solid floor.

Some of the issues relating to your choice of species that are pertinent with solid wood are still going to apply to engineered boards. This is particularly important when

it comes to species that will change color over time, environmental conditions of your space, your climate, and general color variation from board to board as indicated by grading systems. Of course, engineered boards also incorporate other natural materials, like bamboo for instance. But, there will be more on bamboo later!

## CHOOSING VENEER LAYER THICKNESSES

The layer of real wood found in an engineered board tends to vary in thickness from product to product. Some engineered hardwood flooring will allow you to refinish your flooring a specified number of times, usually when the wood veneer layer is 3mm and above. Others with a thinner layer are usually priced accordingly, although many products still deliver the look and performance that most people look for in a real wood floor no matter how thick the veneer happens to be.

A lot of people like to be able to refinish a wood floor in order to apply a new stain, for example. If you feel like this might be necessary in a few years after you've purchased your engineered wood floor, then it's best to choose a product with a thicker veneer layer. If you don't really foresee a refinishing project as being necessary or likely, then a thinner veneer layer may be a good fit. But like with anything, choosing the thickest veneer that your budget allows is probably a good policy.

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# CORK FLOORING

## OVERVIEW

Cork flooring is the result of the grinding of the bark of a cork oak tree into a sturdy, pliant wood-based surface. The key global center for the production of cork floors is Portugal, where the cork oak tree is harvested by hand and in very strict cycles. This low-tech approach results in a process that does not harm the cork oak tree. This adds to the “green” factor of this option of surfacing.

Cork floors tend to be pretty striking to look at as well as being the result of sustainable harvesting. Cork is known for distinctive patterning and an increasing variety of

stained and digitally-printed surfaces to suit surrounding décor. A lot of the time, people have conceptions of cork floors as being crumbly, and not very durable – kind of like an old bulletin board. But in reality, quality cork floors are miles away from that, with many examples of floors proving their long-term performance. In addition to many modern examples of cork floors, cork has been used in the designs of architect Frank Lloyd Wright, and is still performing to this day.

And hey, if they were good enough for Frank ...

## MAIN ADVANTAGES

- Impact resistant,
- Flame-resistant
- Natural sound dampening
- Naturally retains warmth underfoot
- Distinct patterns

## COMMON APPLICATIONS

- Living areas
- Kitchens
- Bedrooms
- Children’s rooms and playrooms
- Spaces for the elderly
- Universal design spaces

## INSTALLATION CONDITIONS

similar to engineered flooring, with bathrooms and laundry areas a no-go

## TYPE OF INSTALLATION

- Floating
- Glue-down.

## SUBFLOOR

Any level, clean, and dry surface

## DOING IT YOURSELF

Yes

## VARIETIES OF CORK FLOORS

Unlike timber-based wood flooring, cork is taken from a single species – the cork oak. And it's taken from a completely separate part of the plant – the bark. So, as such a lot of the natural looks of cork floors tend to be similar, although some manufacturing processes differ, producing distinctive looks. For instance, when wine corks (the primary product of the cork industry) are recycled, some varieties of cork floors reveal the shape of individual wine corks. This can make for a look that is full of the former history of the material; kind of a cork floor version of fossils!

Other styles of cork are more uniform in its natural state, and as a surface that has been factory-stained. More options in cork are the result of high-tech printing technology that is applied directly to the surface of the material. This results in a greater range of choices still, from natural stone, ceramic, and traditional wood grain patterning. As you can tell, cork is very adaptable in terms of look, which is very helpful if you also need what it offers otherwise; natural impact-resistance, noise-dampening, and warmth retention, among others.

## TILE AND PLANK FORMATS

When you're shopping for cork flooring, another decision to make is that of shape, and layout. Cork lends itself very well to all kinds of layouts. When it was first introduced, cork tile was the expected format, particularly in the creation of a seamless cork surface. But, if you're looking to get a traditional plank layout you expect in wood flooring of other types, the development of plank style cork floors can help you get there.

Beyond your choice in tile or plank, a number of options in cork floors are also offered with an attached underpad. This is pretty easily applied to cork, seeing as cork tends to react and to serve in the same way as a lot of commercial underpadding anyway. In any case, if you're looking for a multi-functional tile or plank that will serve as an all-in-one, this might be a criterion to consider when you're shopping for a cork floor.

**INTERESTED?**

**SHOP CORK WOOD FLOORING AT BUILDDIRECT**

# BAMBOO FLOORING

## OVERVIEW

We're cheating a little bit when we say that bamboo flooring is a subset of "wood flooring". Technically, bamboo is a species of grass, and not really a timber product. But, as far as performance and application, bamboo has become a popular material for floors in the same way that timber-based products have. Bamboo carries some unique benefits too, whether you're thinking of solid bamboo flooring, or engineered.

Bamboo has been used in a variety of ways for thousands of years, particularly in China where the most robust species of bamboo used in flooring grows, that being Moso bamboo. When bamboo flooring debuted at the beginning of the 1990s, its application was uncommon in North America. But, by now, it's known as being one of

the most versatile and decorative and practical flooring materials you can get, including in the United States and Canada.

With bamboo, there are a lot of choices to consider for appearance; natural blonde bamboo, caramel-toned carbonized bamboo, plus strand-woven bamboo, and various varieties of stained bamboo as well. There are also different cuts of bamboo to consider, from horizontal to vertical, and each with their own creation processes. Each of these options carry benefits of their own. But, they all represent a stable material that naturally resists warping, while also providing an abrasion-resistant surface that is suitable for use in many spaces.

## MAIN ADVANTAGES

- Unique "knuckle" patterns
- High-tensile board strength
- Wide options in cut and color

## COMMON APPLICATIONS

- Hallways
- Kitchens
- Living areas
- Bedrooms
- Studies
- Below grade areas

## INSTALLATION CONDITIONS

All grades including basement locations, no excessive moisture

## TYPE OF INSTALLATION

- Floating
- Glue-down
- Staple-down

## SUBFLOOR

Any flat, clean, dry surface

## DOING IT YOURSELF

Yes – but, experience advised

## COLORS AND PATTERNS OF BAMBOO

Bamboo grows like many other species of grass, and the patterning that you'll see in a bamboo board will reflect that natural process; the distinctive "knuckle" patterns that help to make it such a distinct surface. That knuckle is the equivalent of a growth ring you'd see in a cut of timber. Like all natural materials, these patterns will vary from board to board. But, when you're looking for an unadorned bamboo surface, these patterns are what will help to add character to a space.

Bamboo is generally organized in two types of colors, not accounting for staining and direct print varieties. The first is "natural" bamboo, which is the blonde bamboo flooring you might have seen in stores or on web pages.

The second variety is what's called "carbonized" bamboo, which is the result of a boiling process that caramelizes the starches in the bamboo stalks. The result of this process is a chocolaty-caramel color range that is slightly softer than the natural variety for durability.

But, once again, bamboo is a material that takes stain very well. And that helps to expand your options for an elegant and decorative bamboo surface in a space to an even greater degree.

## BAMBOO PLANK CUTS

In addition to the color and natural patterning questions, with bamboo there are a couple of choices when it comes to cut as well. The first is what is called 'horizontal' cut bamboo, which is when the bamboo stalks are cut end to end, with the broader face of the bamboo representing the surface of the board. The second cut is the 'vertical' cut, which is the result of the stalks being cut length-wise, to affect a narrower pattern in each board.

Another cut beyond standard bamboo floors is what's called "strand-woven" bamboo. This is a process whereby the parings from the other two types of bamboo are taken, and fused together under great pressure to create an extremely dense variety of bamboo flooring. Not only is this one of the hardest bamboo floors there are, but it also helps to position bamboo as a "green" option in flooring, just because there is so little waste in the production of each variety.

INTERESTED?

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## BEAUTIFUL WOOD FLOORING

Wood flooring has a timeless appeal. You can read that statement on a number of web pages and flooring brochures in a bid to get you to buy a certain kind of wood floor. But, this statement goes beyond marketing. There really is something about wood flooring that seems to appeal to the senses, and to the spirit.

It could be the rich colors that are wonderfully varied so that every board is different, either in a subtle way, or in a dramatic one. It could be the patterns, which vary from species to species, and once again can add an understated effect, or a bold one that demands your attention. It could be the sheer strength and substance of wood floors, in some cases adding structural benefits to your property. It could be that wood is connected to the natural world, and it reminds us that we are too. Maybe it's all of these at once!

In any case, we hope that this document has helped you understand more about your wood flooring options. Whichever one you choose, we know that you're investing not only in a style of flooring, but in your property as a whole!

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