

home

renovation handbook:
flooring

Pull out and save this **comprehensive guide**—the third installment in a four-part series on sprucing up your home.

WRITTEN BY CAROLYN WEBER PHOTOGRAPH BY MARK LUND



flooring

Sick of that ho-hum white kitchen tile or drab wall-to-wall bedroom carpeting? Check out these options for what you can put underfoot.

before you get started

"Many people think about the look of their floors first," says Chris Davis, president of the World Floor Covering Association, in Anaheim, California. "But the most important thing is choosing a material that fits with the way you live." Do you have cats or dogs that run roughshod over the floor? If so, know that if you opt for wood, it may scratch. Will you be standing at a kitchen island for long periods of time?

Then consider a soft floor, like cork, which will be more forgiving on the knees.

If you're not one to get out the broom on a daily basis, take note: Darker floors show less dirt and fewer scuff marks than lighter ones. And patterns mask stains. "You'll notice that a lot of restaurants have busy-looking floors," says Davis. "They focus your eye on the design rather than any debris."

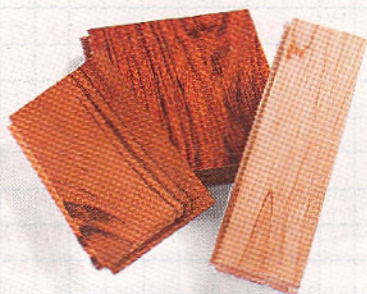
consider your options

Expect to pay \$2 to \$4 a square foot for installation. Flooring materials come in three types: nail-down, glue-down, and floating (planks or squares that click together and lay on top of the subfloor, which is the floor beneath the floor). Which you choose will depend in part on the subfloor you have. Nail-down and glue-down flooring must go over a wood or concrete subfloor; floating floors can generally be installed over any type of subfloor. Consult a professional to see which option will work best for you.

keep in mind

Plan to buy about 10 percent more flooring than you need. "You may have to replace a section down the road," says Geoffrey Mouen, an architect in Celebration, Florida, "and it could be tough to get a perfect match then."

types of flooring



solid hardwood

WHAT IT IS: One of the most popular flooring choices; species run the gamut from pine to exotic Brazilian cherry.

PRO: Wood is a natural heat insulator and feels solid underfoot.

CON: Wood expands and contracts (planks should sit in a home for a couple of days before installation to acclimate to the humidity level). Because of this, "avoid installing wood floors in summer if the space isn't air-conditioned," says Gerry Ellsbury, owner of Plumb Square Builders, in Chevy Chase, Maryland.

COST: \$2 to \$16 a square foot.*



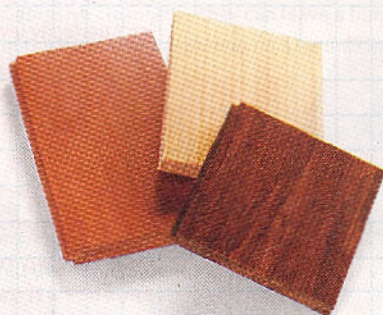
engineered hardwood

WHAT IT IS: A layered plywood-composite core surrounded by thin wood veneers.

PRO: You get the look and the feel of solid hardwood without its vulnerability to moisture. The super-tough factory finish should never need to be refinished, but you can do so if you choose; some manufacturers claim their products can be sanded and refinished up to three times.

CON: Unlike solid wood, it's not available in long boards (more than eight feet), and there aren't many choices of width.

COST: \$2 to \$11 a square foot.



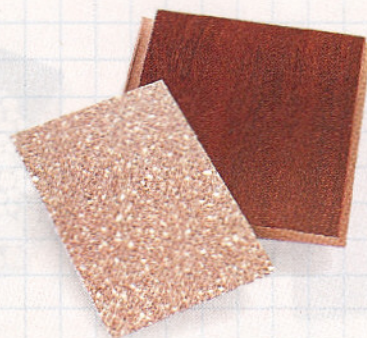
bamboo

WHAT IT IS: A fast-growing grass.

PRO: Bamboo is as hard as wood and withstands moisture better. Its natural yellow tone can be stained darker.

CON: It can fade, dent, and scratch. And while bamboo itself is a green pick, "the adhesives used to bind the reeds together may not be," says Marcie Blough, an interior designer in Richmond, Virginia. (To find a manufacturer that is truly eco-friendly, go to www.coopamerica.org and search the National Green Pages under the category "flooring.")

COST: \$3 to \$16 a square foot.



laminate

WHAT IT IS: A paper photo, usually of wood grain or stone, laminated to a core of particleboard, sawdust, and resin.

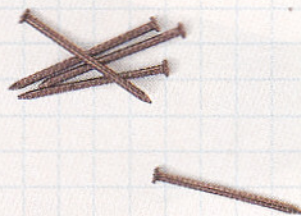
PRO: It comes in various styles, from distressed oak to slate, and looks strikingly similar to its natural counterparts. It's strong, moderately priced, and a cinch to clean. "You can spill anything on this stuff, and it will wipe right up," says Chris Davis. Some laminates feature a sound- and moisture-resistant backing.

CON: It doesn't feel as solid underfoot as other options. It's difficult to repair, and abrasive cleaners can scratch it.

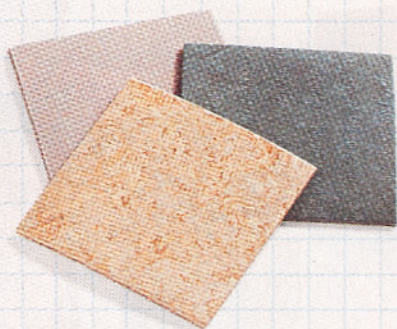
COST: \$1.50 to \$4 a square foot.

tip Walking on a wood floor in high heels can cause dents. A 125-pound woman in heels creates an impact of 2,000 pounds per square inch.

*Prices do not include installation unless otherwise noted.



more types of flooring



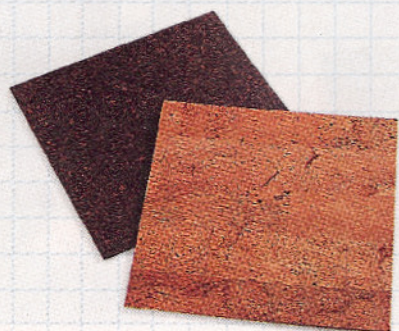
linoleum

WHAT IT IS: A natural material created from a mixture of linseed oil, wood, and cork bark, linoleum has moved beyond the school cafeteria and is fast becoming a go-to choice for eco-conscious home owners.

PRO: It's antimicrobial and antistatic, so it won't collect dust the way other floors do—which is good news for people with allergies, as this helps to maintain indoor air quality. Water-resistant, it's a safe bet in the kitchen or the bathroom.

CON: Getting seams to match perfectly is a bear.

COST: \$3 to \$12 a square foot installed.



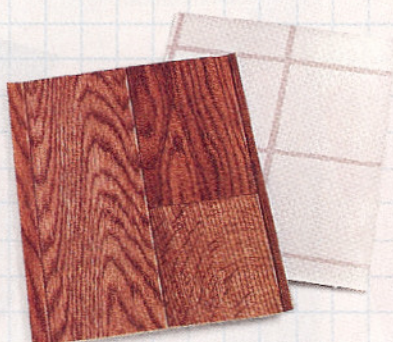
cork

WHAT IT IS: Made from the bark of cork oak trees that grow in Europe and Africa, this is an eco-friendly option, as the cork regenerates 8 to 10 years after being harvested.

PRO: Cork is naturally antifungal and antimicrobial, and it has good sound-deadening properties. It has a durable finish, resists moisture, and is easy on the knees.

CON: It can fade over time if exposed to sunlight. And it can dent. "It's pretty tough," says Davis, "but I wouldn't drag a refrigerator across it."

COST: \$3 to \$16 a square foot.



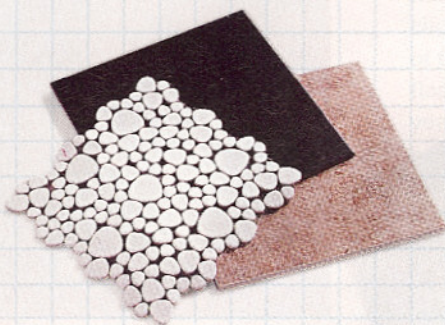
vinyl

WHAT IT IS: The workhorse of the U.S. kitchen for about 50 years, vinyl is made of petroleum-based plastic.

PRO: It's easy on the feet, easy to maintain, and easy to remove. And it's quite the chameleon. "There are some great look-alikes out there," says Davis. "You literally have to get down on the floor to see if it's real wood or tile."

CON: Cheaper grades of vinyl can dull after a few years. It's soft and thus susceptible to tearing if something sharp (like a spiky heel) digs into it.

COST: \$2 to \$12 a square foot.



tile

WHAT IT IS: Ceramic tile is fired clay with a glazed or unglazed finish. Porcelain tile, a kind of ceramic, is fired at an extremely high temperature, making it ultra-durable.

PRO: It's water-resistant. Colors and patterns are endless.

CON: "If you put it in a large room, you'll hear echoes you never knew existed," says Davis. And it's a commitment: If you change your mind, "you have to grind it up, and your house becomes dust city," says Chris Ramey, a floor-covering expert in Miami.

COST: \$2.50 to \$50 a square foot.

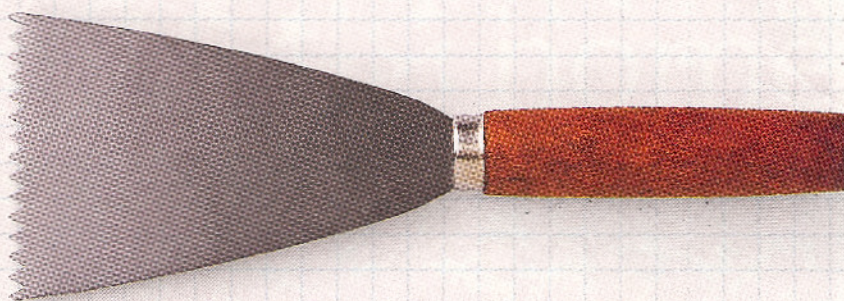
avoid these flooring mistakes

■ CHOOSING AN IMPRACTICAL MATERIAL IN A HIGH-TRAFFIC AREA.

"Big-grained woods, like oak, are more forgiving than clear species, like maple," says Kathryn Chaplow, an interior designer in Grand Rapids, Michigan.

■ INSTALLING ON TOP OF AN UNEVEN SUBFLOOR. "If the subfloor beneath a thin material, like tile, isn't perfectly level, you'll see every bump," says Steve Rados, president of Friends & Family Flooring, in Silver Spring, Maryland.

■ NOT SEEING THE PRODUCT BEFORE YOU BUY. "I once ordered a hand-scraped wood floor and it looked more scratched than hand scraped," says Chaplow. Word to the wise: Always get samples.

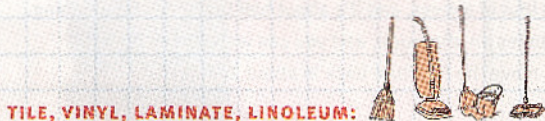


how to keep floors clean



WOOD, BAMBOO:

Ground-in dirt can cause scratches, so regularly clean solid-wood, engineered-wood, and bamboo floors with a soft-bristle broom or a dust mop and vacuum with a brush attachment. Don't wet-mop a wood floor; water can stain and seep in between the slats, causing buckling. Never wax a urethaned floor, as this creates a slippery film and makes the floor hard to clean. Instead, use a cleaner specified for nonurethaned hardwood floors. Thankfully, floor waxing is a thing of the past. "Finishes today create the look people used to try to achieve with wax—only they never wear off," says Chris Davis. Clean pet urine, citrus juice, and red wine immediately so they don't penetrate the surface. Once they do, they're almost impossible to remove without sanding and refinishing.



TILE, VINYL, LAMINATE, LINOLEUM:

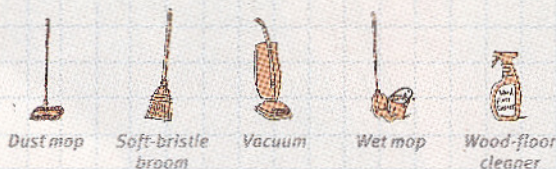
Remove dirt with regular sweeping, dusting, or vacuuming. Wipe up spills with a wet paper towel or cloth, and damp-mop with water. Avoid abrasive cleansers—they can leave a film or scratch the surface of the floor. Use a dust mop on a laminate floor regularly.



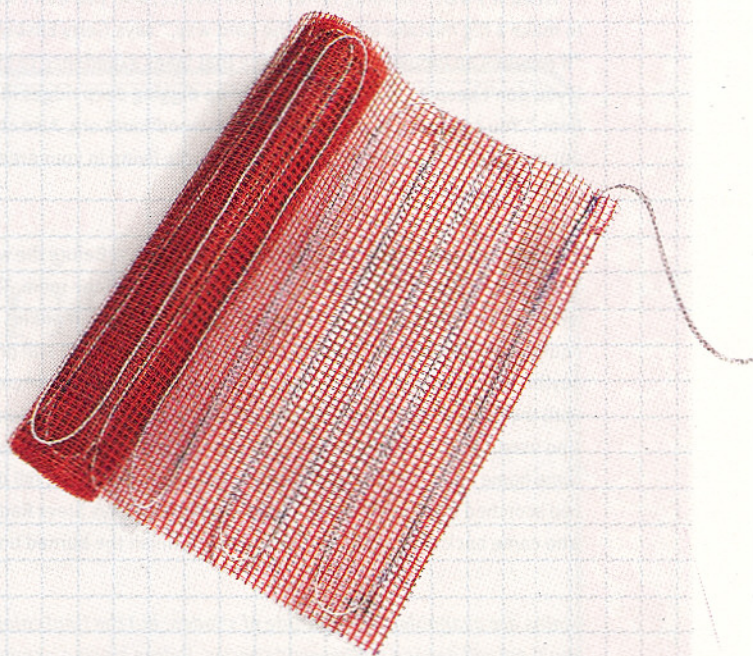
CORK:

Simply sweep, dust-mop, or vacuum. Clean stains with a cleaner recommended by the manufacturer. And prevent dents by putting soft felt pads under furniture legs.

KEY



Visit www.realsimple.com/renovationhandbook for a printable PDF of this guide, along with the first and second installments, "Cabinets and Countertops" and "Windows and Doors."



heat the floor, heat the room

Like an electric blanket for your floor, radiant heat essentially warms your home (or just one room) from the bottom up. It works on the same principle as a radiator, except the tubes of hot water run under the floor (typically embedded in mesh sheets, as shown above) and won't interfere with the furniture arrangement. If the system is not installed during construction, you'll need to rip up the existing floor. It can go under any surface, though it may cause some types of wood to warp (consult with an expert). "It's especially nice under ceramic tile," says Steve Rados. "Tile holds heat really well." Radiant heat is more energy-efficient than a typical forced-air system because the floor retains heat, so you can keep the thermostat at a lower level than usual. Radiant heat also improves indoor air quality because it doesn't blow dust particles around the way traditional heating systems do. The heat is controlled by a wall-mounted thermostat. Installation costs \$6 to \$12 a square foot; system manufacturers include Warmly Yours (www.radiant-floor-heating.com) and Nuheat (www.nuheat.com).

refinishing wood floors: what you need to know

Over time, the finish on wood floors will wear away, particularly in high-traffic areas. Refinishing, which entails sanding down to bare wood, applying any desired stain, then adding a protective coating, can make floors look like new. Here, a few considerations.

■ **HIRE A PRO.** "Sanding is not for the novice, and you don't want to make a big mistake and learn the hard way," says Gerry Ellsbury. "It requires an industrial-size machine that takes experience to master. If you don't keep it moving, you can end up digging deep ridges in your floor." You can find a professional at www.woodfloors.org. Also check out www.servicemagic.com to see how people living in your area have rated local floor refinishers.

■ **BE PREPARED FOR A NOISY, DUSTY PROCESS.** Before the workers arrive, take everything—furniture, rugs, drapes—out of the room. The pros will cover your doorways and vents with plastic. Some companies use equipment with dust-containment systems, but you should still protect anything that you want to keep clean. Be sure to leave on all the coverings until the dust has settled. Another word of warning: "I had a customer who used a bedspread to protect her chandelier, and when her husband came home and turned on the fixture, the spread caught fire, fell down, and scorched the floors that we had just installed," says Steve Rados, who came back the next day to resand and refinish the burned boards.

■ **CHOOSE A STAIN AND A FINISH.** You can keep the natural tone of your wood floors or stain them. "We usually do the first staining in front of the customer to make sure we have the right color," says Rados. Finishes come in gloss, semigloss, or matte and are either oil- or water-based. Oil-based finishes are durable but take longer to cure (about 12 hours), emit some fumes, and tend to have an amber color. Water-based finishes, though typically more expensive, have a milder odor, are nonyellowing, and dry faster (in two to three hours). Refinishers will apply several coats. After the last, the floor will need to dry for one or two days. Prices vary, but figure the job will cost about \$565 to \$850 for a 15-by-15-foot room.

■ **IF YOUR FLOOR ISN'T DAMAGED BUT NEEDS A NEW FINISH, OPT FOR A LESS INVOLVED TECHNIQUE CALLED BUFF AND COAT.** The pros will take off the topmost layer with a special scouring pad, buff the surface, and apply a new coat of finish. There's no sanding, which means less of a mess, and it's about half the price of refinishing. The process takes an afternoon, and you can walk on the floor the next day and move the furniture back in about 24 hours.

Stains are available in a multitude of shades, but the final color you'll get will depend on the wood species. Before making a commitment, test a few options on a piece of wood similar to your flooring.

