

Hard facts on hardwood floors



**Everything you need to know
about hardwood flooring**

A choice that lasts for years

Buying a hardwood floor is an important decision and significant investment. In order to choose the type of flooring that's right for you, it's important to know your needs and preferences in terms of design, wood species, durability, installation and maintenance, and the many other advantages hardwood flooring provides. This guide will take you through the various types and quality options to help you choose a flooring that's everything you want it to be.

Think about it!

You'll probably purchase a hardwood floor only once in your life.

Make the right choice!

Why hardwood?

Hardwood offers many well-known advantages. It's natural, beautiful, warm, and easy to maintain. It costs about as much as other high quality floor coverings, but it lasts dozens of years. It also creates a healthy environment, minimizing the risks of dust allergies.

Available in many styles with a wide variety of features, hardwood flooring can complement any decor. Hardwood enhances a home's interior and adds much to its resale value.

Take the time to compare the many possible floor coverings and consider their benefits over the long term. Think about the feel you want to give your home. Avoid imitations — especially wood-look laminates. Natural is beautiful! Above all, choose wood because you love its warm, classical beauty.

Types of wood flooring

There are three main types of hardwood flooring on the market:

Unfinished solid hardwood

Unfinished solid hardwood is sold in the form of nonvarnished rough strips. These low-cost strips have to be nailed to a wood subfloor. A wide variety of species, grades, and widths are available.

This flooring is generally easy to install, but finishing the surface is more complicated and has to be done on site. You have to pay for finishing on top of the cost of the wood. For quality results, you should hire a highly skilled professional to sand and stain the floor, then to apply three or four coats of polyurethane. This technique is less and less common, and contractors that use it are becoming harder to find.

Because of sanding dust and fumes from the polyurethane, residents have to find someplace else to stay while their floors are being finished, which can take three to five days.

Prefinished solid hardwood

Prefinished solid hardwood is sold as ready-to-install wood strips that are already sanded, stained, and finished with multiple coats of polyurethane with an aluminum oxide protective finish. The finish is factory-applied in an ideal, controlled environment.

A full array of wood species are available in a range of grades, colors, sizes, and shines to blend with any decor. Prefinished solid hardwood is quick and easy to install, and the residents don't have to leave home during installation.

Prefinished engineered hardwood

A prefinished engineered hardwood flooring is sold as strips made up of a hardwood surface (called the wear layer) glued on a plywood base. Developed for installation in areas with variable humidity levels, engineered flooring is more stable than solid wood. The strips can be glued directly onto concrete, an acoustic underlay, or even a subfloor with a floor heating system. They can also be stapled or nailed to a plywood subfloor. This is the perfect floor covering for condominiums, basements, and commercial uses.

The quality of an engineered wood floor can be determined by looking at four factors: the thickness of the wear layer, the number of plies that the plywood is made of, the surface cutting procedure used, and the precision of the cut.

The wear layer should be at least 5/32" (4 mm) thick to offer the same resanding possibilities as solid wood. For greater

stability, the plywood should be at least 5 ply. The wood should be dry sawn rather than rotary peeled or slice cut since only dry sawing produces a high quality, natural-looking hardwood strip. A tongue and groove that join perfectly on all four sides indicates high quality manufacturing.

"Floating floor"

Engineered hardwood should not be confused with laminate flooring, which is made up of laminated planks that only look like wood, finished with a plastic polymer coating. Often laminate flooring is not fastened to the subfloor, thus the name "floating floor."

Recognizing quality

It would be easy to believe that all hardwood floors are the same. There are so many brands and manufacturers of flooring on the market, and all promise quality. But if you learn what really constitutes quality, you'll know what you're looking at and you'll see that only a few brands remain.

Dare to compare...

Uniformity

Lay down a few strips and assemble them. The tongues and grooves should fit perfectly and easily together. Check the floor yourself for uniformity by running your hand over the surface to make sure it's even, indicating a precise cut. Irregular spacing between the strips leaves room for dirt and grime.

Finishes

The quality and durability of a polyurethane finish is not determined by the number of coats, but rather by the quality of the polyurethane and the application procedure used. Applying a polyurethane protective coat with aluminum oxide particles in factory and drying it under ultraviolet light is a popular method that has proven its worth. There are ways to tell whether a product has a good factory finish. For example, the stain should reach to the bottom of the joint to ensure a uniform color. Polyurethane should also be applied in the joints so they don't absorb dirt and water, which would quickly darken. Make sure the color is consistent from one box to another.

Lighter woods are more likely to change color or turn yellow from the effect of intense light or the sun's rays. To reduce and slow discoloration, some manufacturers mix a UV treatment directly into their polyurethane finish.

Antimicrobial finish

Some manufacturers add an antimicrobial agent to their finish. There is no advantage to this treatment, since polyurethane does not promote bacteria. Please remember, germs proliferate in areas where humidity is high, and they attack the wood, not the finish. If the humidity level in your home is high, it may damage your flooring. And if the finish is cracked, the antibacterial treatment won't help in the least.

Imperfections

Know how to recognize unusual imperfections. It's normal and even pleasant to see some healthy knots and mineral marks in the wood. These characteristics don't affect the quality of the floor, and actually make it look more real. However, some manufacturers let bigger knots and a percentage of manufacturing or finishing defects slip through, reducing the quality of the final product.

"V" joints

Once assembled, prefinished hardwood floor strips form a "V" joint. The V joint should be as small and as uniform as possible to hide imperfections in the subfloor. This will also prevent premature wear on strip edges and make it easier to move furniture without damaging the wood or the finish. If the joint is too deep, dirt and dust will accumulate and your floor will be harder to maintain.

Warranty

Polyurethane applied after installation are much less wear-resistant than factory finishes, and only the application is guaranteed. Prefinished floors, on the other hand, are finished with multiple coatings of polyurethane applied in ideal conditions and dried under ultraviolet light, and are generally guaranteed for 15, 25, or 30 years. Made of aluminum oxide, these finishes are exceptionally durable. If you follow the maintenance procedures, they will last far beyond the warranty.



Make your choice!



Wood flooring comes in a wide range of species, designs, and colors. It's all a matter of taste, but a wood floor is for life. That's why it's so important to choose carefully. Talk to a number of experts for advice on the type of flooring that's best for you.

Species



Each species of wood has its own grain, color, and veining. Your choice of species depends on your personal preferences and the effect you want to achieve. The most popular species are oak and maple, followed by birch, ash, beech, cherry, and walnut. Exotic, deluxe woods are also available, such as Brazilian cherry, mahogany and sapele, which are very warm in color and extremely hard.

For home use, the hardness factor is not really a serious issue. It is also important not to choose a species from pictures — ask to see a sample.

Color

A stained floor gives a unique feel to each room. But be sure to select stains that will match different decors, since your wood floor will outlast any trend in home fashion.

With prefinished hardwood floors, you can choose to install different colored strips to frame a room or accent a particular feature of your decor in a contrasting color.



Gloss

There are three main glosses on the market:

High gloss: A very bright, smooth finish that tends to highlight scratches or marks of any kind and makes dirt and dust more visible.

Semi-gloss: This medium-bright finish is the standard for prefinished hardwood floors.

Low gloss: More and more popular, low gloss finish minimizes the appearance of scratches and marks. It stays looking new longer than glossy finishes.

Grade

Grading is a means of rating strips according to variations in the wood's natural color. For example, **“select & better”** grade woods are more uniform in color than **“rustic”** or **“traditional”** grade, which presents greater, more pronounced natural color variation.

To understand the grading system, compare two samples of the same species with different grades. Also ask to compare a number of strips from the same box to check the grading and manufacturing. For some manufacturers, products graded in the third category are not guaranteed and may have knot holes or manufacturing and finishing defects.



Positioning

Your wood flooring should ideally be installed in opposite direction of your subfloor joists. But you should also consider the shape and size of the room. For example, installing the strips lengthwise may make a long room look even longer, and it may be more flattering to lay the strips diagonally. If you like an original look but still have more traditional tastes, try a **“herringbone”** design.





Width

Strips are generally available in standard widths of 2-1/4", 2-1/2", and 3-1/4". Wider widths are becoming more and more popular, some up to 5" in width. Your choice will depend on the effect you want to create. Narrower strips make a room look longer, while wider strips make it appear shorter. Remember, however, that a tight grained wood like maple expands more with humidity, which may make narrower strips preferable for some uses.

Accessories

Installing a hardwood floor usually requires much more than just prefinished hardwood strips. You'll surely need edgings, stair nosings, wood vents, and moldings to join with the walls. Make sure you can get these basic accessories in the same stain and gloss as your flooring. Ask retailers if they have all the accessories needed for the complete installation of a prefinished hardwood floor.



Installation

Don't hesitate to hire a professional. Remember, your floor may last a hundred years. Invest judiciously in proper installation so you'll be fully satisfied with the result.

Maintenance

Your floor's worst enemies are water, soap, and sand. Don't use a wet mop or commercial soaps. All you need is a damp cloth, or use the care products recommended by the manufacturer, and vacuum regularly.

Humidity

Unlike other floor coverings, wood is a living material. That means you have to be particularly careful of the humidity level in your home before, during, and after installation. To avoid stressing your floor, you should always keep the average relative humidity level at about 45%.

Choosing a retailer

As this guide has shown you, a number of variables come into play when choosing a hardwood floor. But equally important is finding out about the various retailers and choosing wisely. Buy your hardwood floor from a specialist — one who not only sells flooring, but can also give you advice and help you complete your project according to your priorities and budget.





There's more to a successful project than just knowing what kinds of hardwood floors are available on the market. Make sure you actually see a large representative sample (species, grade, and color). Don't be afraid to ask your retailer if you can compare products, open boxes of strips, and try assembling a few. Touch the surface of the wood to make sure the strips are uniform and that they're well manufactured and finished. Many hardwood floors may look alike, but in terms of performance, few compare.

Now look at the following criteria and start personalizing your purchase.

1 What type of home do you live in?

If you live in a single family home, find out if your subfloor is made of wood or concrete. In a condo, special installation is required for proper soundproofing. Ask your condo association for the recommended soundproofing standards and consult a flooring specialist.

2 What kind of furniture is in the room, and what style of decor?

Is there already wood in the room? Are there a lot of furnishings, or just a few? What shades are they? In a new home, the ambiance you're looking for will largely influence your choice of wood species, grade, color, and finish. Consult an interior designer.

3 What rooms are you planning to floor?

Sketch out the rooms where you want to install your hardwood floor. Indicate the areas of the rooms and make note of stairways, closets, and any obstacles that will require special fitting. Find out what kind of subfloor you have and in what direction the joists run. In a basement, engineered flooring is the best choice.

4 How many people live in your home?

The more people there are, the greater the traffic and the more durable your finish needs to be. If you have young children or pets, a low gloss finish would be better since it minimizes the appearance of scratches.

5 Who should you have install your floor?

You can hire flooring installation specialists who guarantee their work. Good retailers can guide you.

6 Find out about your expert retailer's services

- Does your retailer have a good product and accessory inventory?
- How are products delivered? How long will it take?
- Does your retailer offer an installation service?
- Can you get maintenance products and the manufacturer's maintenance guide?
- Does the company do repairs and refinishing in the case of wear or aging?
- What do you know about the retailer's and manufacturer's warranties?

7 Ask about the retailer's experience and reputation.

- How many years has it been in business?
- Is it an authorized dealer of the brand you want to buy?
- Do you know anyone who has bought from the company and would recommend it?
- Can the retailer provide references? (*Ask to see photos or videos of its work.*)
- Is the estimate you received detailed and exact?
- Can the retailer explain the technical aspects of installing a hardwood floor?



Beware of bargain specialists. Your savings won't mean much if you receive a low quality product without after-sale service.



Make the right choice!

This purchase guide provides all the information you need to make a wise choice in your hardwood flooring purchase. When you're shopping around, always remember these three basic principles:

- Good planning will save you unpleasant and costly surprises.
- A knowledgeable, expert retailer will provide sound advice and successful results.
- Purchasing a quality product will save you worries and give you peace of mind for years to come.

If you respect these principles, you're sure to make the best choice based on your priorities, and you'll know you've made a long term investment in the product that will give you the best value for your dollar.

Remember, you'll probably purchase a hardwood floor only once in your life.



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