

The Facts on Flooring

How to select and care for hardwood floors

What are the different grades of hardwood flooring?

The Wood Flooring Manufacturers Association divides unfinished hardwood into four grades depending on how “clear” it is—that is, how few knots, mineral streaks and manufacturing marks it contains. The grades are: Clear, Select, No. 1 Common and No. 2 Common. Visit the Web site www.nofma.org for more information on wood grades.

What species of hardwood are best for flooring?

Depending on your taste and the wood’s availability, there are plenty of hardwoods that make long-lasting and attractive flooring, such as ash, birch, cherry, elm, hickory, oak and walnut. Many other types—such as alder, gum and sassafras—are not recommended for flooring because they don’t lend themselves to heavy wear and tear.

What are the different types of hardwood flooring?

There are three basic types of hardwood flooring: strip, plank and parquet. Strip is the most slender and most common type; plank is slightly wider than strip; and parquet comes in large tiles and is best for creating decorative flooring patterns. There is also “engineered wood,” a composite hardwood that is made from layers of several different woods and is more resistant to expanding and contracting than regular hardwoods.

Why does hardwood flooring sometimes expand and contract?

During times of excessive heat and humidity, hardwood takes in moisture, which causes it to expand. During times of excessive cold and dryness, hardwood releases moisture, which causes it to contract. Use humidifiers in the winter and air conditioning in the summer to combat this—hardwood flooring should be stable at a humidity level of around 50 percent.

What finishes are available for hardwood flooring?

Hardwood flooring finishes come in four varieties: surface, penetrating, sheen and extra-durable. Surface finish involves staining the wood and giving it a coat of polyurethane or varnish. A penetrating finish entails staining the wood and giving it a wax coating. A sheen finish is achieved by applying a gloss to the wood’s surface. An extra-durable finish is a thick protective coat, usually resin-based or acrylic, which creates a strong barrier between the floor and substances that could damage the floor, such as dirt and moisture.

What is “solid wood,” and how does it differ from “all wood?”

Solid wood is made entirely of hardwood; all wood consists of composite boards with a hardwood veneer. Solid wood is generally preferable because it is more durable, although all wood may be more cost-effective.

How can I tell if the flooring I’m considering is made of true hardwood?

Some non-hardwood products are named to sound like hardwood, such as Malaysian oak, which is actually rubberwood. It’s always important to find out if what you’re purchasing is actually what you want. Visit www.hardwood.org for a comprehensive look at non-hardwoods that could easily be mistaken for what you’re really after.

What are the benefits of having hardwood floors?

Since hardwood floors harbor less dust, pollen and other allergens than carpeting, they are better for individuals with allergies. They’re durable, and they’re totally unique—no one else in the world will have the same exact hardwood floor as you.

How can I keep my hardwood floors in great shape?

Vacuum and/or dust mop your hardwood floors weekly—or at least as often as you vacuum your other floors. Vacuuming works best for removing dirt and dust before it gets caked into the finish and dulls its luster. Never use water to clean your hardwood floors—even small amounts can damage your floor’s finish and warp the wood itself. Only use cleaning products that are designed specifically for hardwood floors. Place doormats at the entrance to any rooms with hardwood floors to prevent dirt and dust from getting inside.

—Paul Franzen