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Floor Coverings:

Options for Every Lifestyle and Budget

BY JAN PHILLIPS

NORTHERN MICHIGAN

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Endless design possibilities exist to meet the flooring needs of Michigan homeowners. Options in the marketplace today include hardwood, laminate, natural stone, tile, carpet, and vinyl floor coverings. In addition, environmentally friendly surfaces such as bamboo, cork and linoleum are also increasingly popular options. These products provide visual unification between spaces, and can add color, texture, and pattern to a room.

Many considerations need to be made when choosing floor coverings. Most important is the function of the room. Who will use it and for what purpose? Will people have food or drinks in the space? Is noise reduction a factor? Is there a water source or door to the outside? The basic lifestyle of the owners needs to be considered. Family size, pets and available time to care for flooring are to be considered also. Is the style of the room to be rustic, traditional or contemporary, casual or formal? Where are the natural light sources? Is the house climate-controlled year-round, or will the heat be turned down or off during certain seasons? Will in-floor heating systems be used? What type of subfloor exists? How long will the owners live in the home? And finally, what is a realistic budget for the project?

With a wide range of designs and price options, hardwood floors have been a classic favorite and timeless investment for Michigan homeowners. Offering strength and beauty with unlimited natural details, the diverse appearance of wood appeals to many. Solid wood

is generally $\frac{3}{4}$ " thick and must be nailed to a wood subfloor. It can be sanded and finished in place, or purchased pre-finished. The wear resistance from the finish will determine durability. Engineered wood flooring allows for more versatile installations. It can be nailed or glued to the substrate and can be used over concrete and crawl spaces. Wider planks are more stable in an engineered product as the construction process allows for greater control in expansion/contraction forces.

To maintain wood floors, sweep, dust or vacuum the floor regularly with the hard floor attachment. Periodically clean with a product recommended by the manufacturer. Keep mats at all outside doors to prevent sand or dirt from scratching and dulling the floor's finish. Wipe up spills immediately. Use floor protectors under furniture to minimize indentions and scratches. Rearrange area rugs and furniture periodically to allow the wood to age evenly. Keep pet's nails trimmed to prevent damage to the floor.

As an alternative to hardwood, many homeowners are installing laminate flooring which was introduced to the United States markets in the mid-1980's. Digital images of wood or stone give this engineered product its appearance, allowing for a luxury look with much less cost. Laminate is considered to be a very durable product with easy installation, maintenance and stability of color. This floating floor system is installed over a thin layer of foam underlayment. It can be installed directly over existing non-cushioned products, thus eliminating the tear-out process and speeding along remodeling of rooms. Laminate cleaning products are readily available. As with hardwood, water spills should be wiped up immediately.

Ceramic tiles continue to be a popular flooring choice for many homeowners. With an unlimited range of sizes and colors, tiles are suitable in most areas. Design details can be achieved in the layout of tiles; a grid, diagonal, staggered, or hopscotch pattern can add visual interest to a space. Glazed tiles provide an unlimited color range and superior stain resistance. Gloss levels will determine suitable use. High gloss tiles scratch more easily and are more slippery than matte or satin finishes. Color ranges can vary on a scale of 1 to 4, with 1 being most uniform in color and 4 showing more variation. Tiles are also grouped from I to V for proper applications for use. This information is generally shown on the back of tile samples. Unglazed tiles have thru-body color and are more slip resistant. Porcelain tiles are high-density tiles with low moisture absorption, thus are an excellent choice for wet areas and in areas where frost/freeze cycles are of concern. It's important to have extra tiles on hand for unexpected patching, as dye lots vary and styles can be discontinued. Care of tiles is relatively easy. Dust mop or vacuum regularly; damp mop as needed.

Natural stone choices such as slate, limestone, flagstone, and river rock or pebbles can also be used effectively as a hard surface choice. Periodic sealing will be necessary to maintain their appearance.

Shower floors require specific considerations. Water absorption ratings and slip-resistance are important. Tiles here are generally smaller, allowing more grout lines for additional friction. New sealed membrane systems for waterproofing shower floors and enclosures are available.

Another top-seller for Michigan homes would be carpet. Many people prefer a soft texture underfoot over a hard surface choice. With numerous styles and price points, the color, texture, and pattern of carpet will add beauty and function to the overall design scheme. Pile construction and stain resistance are important factors to consider.

Custom-sized rugs from broadloom or area rugs are excellent options for use over hardwood, laminate or tile. Rugs can be used as backdrops for upholstery and wall colors, or can become the main focal point and design inspiration of a room.

Vinyl flooring is available in many colors and styles and is an excellent choice in high traffic or wet areas. With proper installation and care, vinyl flooring will perform well for many years.

Eco-friendly surfaces such as bamboo, cork, and linoleum are becoming more popular in residential settings. Bamboo is technically a grass, grows wild in China and has a five year regrowth period. There is little waste or pollution in the harvesting and production of this strong flooring choice. Bamboo is now available with many stain colors in low gloss finish, and can be installed as a floating system. Cork from the Mediterranean is harvested every nine years. Cork has a natural, shock absorbing feel and many colors, textures and patterns are available. Noise reduction is greatly reduced in areas. Having been used in public places long before residential applications, cork is extremely durable. Vacuum or "Swiffer" clean bamboo and cork. Use cleaning products approved by the manufacturer. Linoleum is another natural product made of renewable resources including linseed oil, resin, cork dust, limestone, wood flour, and pigments that are pressed into a jute backing. Popular before the advent of vinyl floors, it is gaining a resurgence of popularity and availability. It is available in tiles or sheets installed with an adhesive.

Proper selection and installation of materials is critical to the lifespan of any floor covering. Follow guidelines for use and always choose qualified installers. If doing projects on one's own, use proper tools and installation materials. Many warranties are void if such precautions are not taken. Once installed, clean floor coverings as recommended. Then, sit back and enjoy. □

