



Hardwood Flooring Q&A

Self-authored piece from The Hardwood Council extols the virtues of hardwood flooring and gives maintenance tips by The Hardwood Council

The beauty, durability and comfort of American hardwoods make them a natural choice for heavily used areas.

Woods like red oak, white oak, cherry and hard maple can be greener flooring and trim choices than other types of materials used for high-traffic areas. Determining what type of hardwood to use for a floor, or what type of wood to use as paneling or as trim for an office, might seem to be a question of aesthetics, but the process is much more complicated. It's a matter of architects, designers and builders asking the right questions, which they can learn by studying "American Hardwoods for High-Traffic Areas," a continuing education course offered through The Hardwood Council.

Completing the course will enable professionals to learn about hardwoods and how they are used in construction, while earning Continuing Education Units (CEUs). The course also will answer many questions, including:

Q: What type of flooring is a better value — hardwood, linoleum, carpet, or engineered wood?

A: Over the life of the flooring, hardwood floors are the best value for the average consumer. Broadloom and tile carpeting have life spans of four to six years, requiring frequent replacement. Linoleum has a tendency to crack and wear unevenly, and ceramic tile flooring will crack under heavy use. But even after 20 years (or more) of use, hardwood flooring can look new again if it is refinished. Given the proper care, hardwood floors can last 50 years or more.

Engineered wood is a type of flooring that is made up of layers of wood stacked and glued together, with a finished hardwood at the surface of the board. For high-traffic areas, where the floor will get an inordinate amount of use, such as in a retail store, engineered wood can be a more economical alternative, while offering the same durability as hardwood. Engineered wood also may be less affected by changes in humidity than hardwood.

Q: What are some of the main characteristics of American hardwoods?

A: Some American hardwoods are harder than others, as indicated by their score on the Janka Scale for hardness. Red oak, with a Janka rating of 1290, is the industry benchmark, but the hardness of a wood is only one characteristic, and not necessarily the most important characteristic to consider, depending upon your intended use for the wood.

A hardwood's quality is judged by the National Hardwood Lumber Association (NHLA) grading system, which describes the amount of "usable" clear material in a board. The highest-grade boards are long, wide and free of defects. There are eight hardwood lumber grades, with Firsts and Seconds (FAS) being the highest and No. 3B Common, the lowest. The Wood Flooring Manufacturer's Association (NOFMA) also has a grading system that describes the appearance of hardwoods according to their color, grain and markings. Hardwoods are described in terms of how they appear as heartwood and as sapwood.

Q: How do you know what kind of finish to use when having a hardwood floor installed?

A: The type of finish that you choose for a floor is dependent in part upon what the floor will be used for, including whether it will receive an inordinate amount of traffic. Some finishes will change color and the appearance of the wood over time, while others will stay clear. Other finishes are more resistant to abrasion and wear-and-tear.

Surface finishes of hardwood floors involve applying a stain for a particular color, followed by applying a final layer of polyurethane or varnish to give a protective coating. In some products, both the stain and polyurethane are combined in one type of coating. Common types of floor finish products include oil-based urethane, water-based urethane, moisture-cured urethane and conversion varnish. Penetrating finishes actually penetrate the wood to create a protective

seal. A wax coating on the floor will give a low-gloss satin sheen that can be maintained with additional thin applications.

Hardwood flooring also can be pre-finished at the factory, which allows for easier installation and maintenance because the flooring needn't be finished on-site. Such pre-finished flooring is available in strip flooring and parquet flooring.

At the Museum of Modern Art in New York (MoMA), which averages some 2.5 million visitors a year, the choice for durable flooring was 120,000 feet of American white oak. The flooring was finished on site using two coats of linseed oil and then wax.

Q: Does using American hardwoods contribute to deforestation and the danger of these types of trees ultimately disappearing?

A: Hardwoods are one of our most renewable resources. Today's hardwood forests grow far more wood than is harvested from them every year. The U.S. Forest Service estimates that hardwood volume in American forests increases by 10 billion cubic feet annually. In fact, the volume of American hardwoods is 90 percent larger than it was 50 years ago.

Q: Aren't hardwood floors tough to maintain?

A: Generally speaking, hardwood floors can be maintained with simple, routine cleaning measures. Keeping the floor free of dust and dirt is essential. Regular sweeping with a broom that has exploded tips to trap dust is recommended. Occasional mopping of the floor with an appropriate cleaning product is recommended
