BUYER'S GUIDE

Step-by-step guide to planning
your hardwood floor purchase

Why choose **hardwood**?

Buying a hardwood floor is an important investment. Before you invest, you should ensure that the floor you choose meets your needs perfectly. This guide is an excellent tool to help you make a sound choice. It's important to choose your flooring with care. You can't change it as easily as you can rearrange your furniture—you should be thinking long-term for this once-in-a-lifetime purchase!

Among the wide array of possible floor coverings, hardwood provides some incomparable qualities. It's natural, environmentally friendly, attractive, warm and easy to maintain—giving any home's decor a rich and distinctive feel while increasing resale value. Hardwood flooring also helps create a healthy home environment by eliminating the allergens associated with dust-trapping carpet.

CATEGORIES

Hardwood flooring is the easy choice for your needs—it's suitable for most every application and environment. Hardwood flooring is divided into broad categories by manufacturing methods. There are three types of hardwood; choose the one that's right for you:

Solid hardwood

These are boards made entirely of hardwood, generally 3/4" (19 mm) thick.

Unfinished hardwood comes as plain unfinished boards. After installation, a specialist sands the wood and then applies stain and three or four coats of varnish. Finish applied on-site like this does not resist wear nearly as well as a factory-applied finish (as is found on prefinished wood). Guarantees on this type of hardwood cover only installation and exclude wear and tear.

Prefinished solid hardwood is pre-sanded, stained and finished with factory-applied protection. It is prepared in a controlled and ideal environment. This type of flooring is installation—ready. Installation is fast and easy, without the offensive varnish odors that occur when finishing is done on-site in the home. You won't have to leave the house during installation and you'll be able to return your furniture to its normal position very shortly after installation.

Glueless engineered hardwood

Glueless engineered hardwood without cleats/nails is both economical and eco-friendly. Boards consisting of a hardwood surface over a high density fibre (HDF) base have profiled ends that fit together perfectly in a snap.

This flooring does not require glue, nails or staples—hence the common term "floating floor." Some floating floors are only laminated panels covered in a printed wood pattern, protected by a plastic polymer coating.

Engineered hardwood

A technological masterpiece, this hardwood combines a real wood surface with a solid plywood base. Created for environments with varying humidity, engineered flooring is more stable than solid hardwood flooring. Boards can be glued directly to concrete (even with a radiant heating system) or on an acoustic membrane. They can also be stapled to a plywood subfloor. This type of flooring is ideal for condominiums, basements, or commercial use.

There are four criterias to evaluate the quality of engineered flooring:

1. the thickness of the hardwood layer;
2. the number of plywood plies (layers);
3. the cutting process used for the hardwood surface;
4. the precision of the cut for the base layers.

The hardwood layer, or "wear layer", must have a minimal thickness of 5/32" (4 mm) to allow sanding as needed, similar to solid hardwood. The plywood must have at least five plies to ensure good floor stability. Dry saw cutting provides a higher—quality hardwood layer with a genuinely natural look and is preferable to rotary peeling or slice cutting.

THE STYLE

Even after you have analyzed all your options and decided on the type of hardwood that you want, the process isn't finished. There are still many choices to make: the color of the floor, the width of the boards, and the shine of the finish. These all depend on your taste and the look you desire… things that deserve careful consideration. An installed floor will last for decades upon decades—choose wisely.

The species

Each species of wood has a different grain, color and texture. Oak and maple are the best-known and most popular species, followed by yellow birch, white oak, hickory and walnut. Some consumers are attracted to the warmth and richness of more high-end exotic species—consider the prestige that comes with a floor made from Brazilian cherry, african mahogany or sapele. Personal taste and preference lead us to choose one species over another. Your room decor and your desired effect will influence your decision.

The color

Long considered a mere construction material, hardwood flooring is now a key decorative element. Prefinished floors offer a range of on-trend, contrasting, and multi-tone color options.

The rustic look

Some manufacturers have developed techniques to recreate the rustic appearance of the floors of the olden days. Their methods fine-tune the coloring and finishing of panels to simulate the passage of time, resulting in large knotted boards with an aged appearance.

The grade

The grade is a way to classify wood planks according to natural color variations and the presence of knots, splits, and other character marks. It refers only to the visual aspect of wood. It is not a measure of quality. Generally speaking, there are three main grades:

- Select and Better: Wood planks with the most uniform natural coloration.
- Exclusive: Wood planks with some pronounced and nuanced color.
- Character (rustic or antique): Wood planks featuring knots, small splits, mineral streaks, and other natural characteristics of wood.

Select & Better | Exclusive | Character (rustic or antique)

By examining several boards from the same box, you can confirm if the product is classified accurately and also see the quality of the manufacturing. Some manufacturers use third-category grades to accommodate significant manufacturing and finishing defects and to sell these products with no guarantee.

The texture
To more easily hide the signs of everyday wear, some flooring manufacturers use a variety of processes to create textures including a brushed finish or a look reminiscent of cork or distressed wood.

These floors can be a good option for pet owners or people with active lifestyles, as their textures better mask the normal marks of daily wear.

The gloss
Products currently on the market fall into one of four categories:

1. High-gloss: Very shiny, smooth surface that reflects a lot of light but tends to amplify marks and scratches.
2. Semi-gloss: A medium shine, the most common for prefinished floors.
3. Matte: A satin or completely matte finish that reduces the appearance of marks and scratches.
4. Ultra-matte: A highly matte finish that gives the look of oiled hardwood floors.

The width
Boards come in a wide range of widths, from 2-1/4" up to 7-3/4". The choice of width is a matter of preference and the desired style. Narrower boards accentuate a room's depth, while wider boards have the opposite effect.

The board direction
Along the length of the room, the width of the room, diagonal or patterned? Aesthetics and personal taste will direct you toward your choice of board direction. When the boards are being installed on a wood subfloor, it's recommended to position them perpendicular to the joists. Similarly, you should pay attention to optical illusions—it's better, for instance, to avoid placing boards widthwise in a long, narrow room.

Consumers seeking a unique look can opt for a herringbone floor where fixed-length boards are arranged into geometric patterns.

Herringbone

Double Herringbone

Bricks

Cube

Basket

Specialist retailers are dedicated to finding the best possible product to meet their clients' needs, and their advice is usually sound and helpful.

THE QUALITY

All hardwood floor manufacturers say they offer high quality and reliable products. It's hard to really know if what they're saying is true. Before you buy, review all the criteria of a quality floor and examine the product carefully to see that it meets these criteria. Make an informed choice and avoid common pitfalls. In the end, quality is what separates the leaders from the rest of the pack!

The uniformity

Put some boards on the floor and assemble them. The tongues and grooves should mesh together perfectly. Run your hand over the surface—you shouldn't be able to perceive a difference in thickness. Lastly, there shouldn't be any space between the boards (where dirt could accumulate).

The "V" joints

Prefinished hardwood floors are designed to create a "V" joint between the boards when assembled. This joint mitigates any imperfections in the subfloor, prevents premature wear on the edges of the boards and makes it easy to move furniture. The "V" joint requires particular attention on purchase, because a "V" that is too deep or irregular will encourage dirt accumulation. Make sure that stain is applied right to the base of the "V" joints. This will ensure that floor color is uniform.

The visual aspect of wood

The beauty of wood flooring stems from the unique characteristics of each board. The presence of small knots and mineral streaks is normal and even desirable, depending on the look you are after. These visual details add to the authentic and natural character of the hardwood floor without compromising its quality. Visual details are different from defects.

Defects are a sign of inferior manufacturing or finishing. Manufacturers that tolerate too many defects are offering an inferior—quality product.

The finish

The number of coats of finish is not a reliable indicator of the quality or durability of the finish. The quality of the finish and the method of application are far better indicators. Factory—finishing methods, including an ultraviolet drying stage, represent proven techniques that result in remarkably resistant products.

Some manufacturers include UV protection in their finishing products to slow or modulate color shifts and yellowing in unstained wood floors. Others also add an antimicrobial agent to make maintenance even easier and to maintain a healthy home environment.

The warranty

The application of finish on prefinished flooring is done in successive coats in ideal and controlled conditions. The result of this process is a product that resists wear so well that manufacturers confidently give it a long-term guarantee. By following the maintenance instructions given for prefinished hardwood, you can ensure durability far beyond the guarantee period.

THE PURCHASE

There are still things to consider following the choice of a hardwood floor—elements that can have good or bad long-term consequences. What treatments should be used to avoid unpleasant surprises? What steps should be taken to ensure that this investment remains a good one? Taking time to think things over is never a cause for regret.

The retailer
Your choice of retailer is almost as important as your choice of flooring. Why? Because the retailer should also serve as your advisor. They have to respect your tastes and help you choose a product that meets your needs perfectly.

The accessories
Your purchase won't be limited to just floorboards. You will need complementary accessories to make the room work as a whole, including to join with the walls and stair nosings.

Are these things available in the same stain, gloss and species as your floor?

The installation
A quality hardwood floor can easily last over a century. Since buying this type of floor represents a significant investment, it's smart to trust a professional with the installation work. This will make the most of the money you're investing.

The assessment
Sample size plays a pivotal role in the final decision—making. Be sure to get large enough samples. A sample that is too small won't give you a good idea of how the floor is going to look once it's installed across a whole room. Ensure that the floor's grade, color variations, species and wood grain are visible in the sample. It is important to see large samples, examine the contents of boxes to compare several pieces, and assemble some boards. Boards should be smooth and uniform to the touch, and the quality of their manufacture and finishing must be visible to the eye.

The humidity
Although very durable, wood does react to its environment, especially humidity. It's recommended that you keep humidity levels at around 45% to prevent unfavorable conditions for the floor and make your house more comfortable in general.

The maintenance
Hardwood floors are more durable and stable than ever. But water, soap and sand are still a constant threat. You must absolutely avoid washing your hardwood floor with an excess of water, excessively wet mops, and commercial soaps. Regular vacuuming, a damp cloth and manufacturer recommended products are all you need to keep your floor looking great.

Ask the right questions

Renovation or new construction?
If your hardwood purchase is for a home renovation, you must first determine which existing structural and decorative elements will remain in your home after the floor installation. Choose a floor that will complement these elements and work as part of the whole look. If your hardwood purchase is for a new house, the decor and style you are looking for will guide your choice of flooring.

What type of home is it for?
The type of residence will significantly influence the flooring type and installation method you need. In a single-family home, the subfloor will dictate the type of floor you can install. In a condominium, your condo owner's agreement usually has rules regarding soundproofing which have to be considered. In a basement, an engineered floor will be your preferred option.

Which rooms need flooring?
A sketch of the house and the areas to be covered will be a huge help to the retailer. It should include dimensions, as well as obstacles and permanent features like stairways, closets, etc.

How many people live in the residence?
Big families mean lots of feet in the house, which means it's best to choose flooring that can stand up to a lot of wear. Similarly, matte or satin finishes, brushed and textured floors forgive many more of the accidental scratches that come with small children and pets.

Who should I trust to install my floor?
Given the importance of your investment in your hardwood floor and the long-term stakes surrounding its installation, it's recommended that you seek out the services of installation specialists. They guarantee their work with no risk of invalidating the manufacturer's warranty.

Where should I buy my hardwood floor?
Choosing the right retailer involves a combination of several factors. First, they must be authorized to sell the type and brand of floor you want. A retailer that offers a wide range of services may be able to more efficiently help clients through the entire process—some, for instance, also offer professional decoration and installation services.

You must also be sure you're doing business with a real professional. Like in every field, years of experience, personal references, and satisfied clients are all good signs. It's normal to ask for photos or videos of recent work, to demand a clear price quote, and to get technical information about floor installation.

To avoid delays and unpleasant surprises, you may also be interested in working with a retailer that carries a lot of stock, not only of flooring but also accessories and maintenance products.

Beware of bargains! Buying your floor at a retailer that focuses on "low, low prices" can quickly become a nightmare when both the product and service prove to be of low quality.

Take Action

In a nutshell, you need to consider four basics when purchasing a hardwood floor:

1. Plan your purchase: Proper planning can help you avoid lots of costly surprises.
2. Ask the experts: Have questions or concerns? Don't hesitate to contact the manufacturer of the flooring you like. Getting advice directly from the manufacturer is wise, and can be essential to making good decisions.
3. Choose the right flooring: A professional designer can help you make sure your purchase is a smart investment.
4. Choose a high quality product: Choosing a high quality product is something you'll never regret. It will give you peace of mind and a sense of satisfaction.

These basics are crucial to purchasing the flooring that best meets your needs. Take the process seriously, because a hardwood floor is a major investment. It will automatically increase the market value of your residence and will be a part of your home for many years.

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