

Walk on wood

Traditional flooring option more attractive than ever, whether reclaimed, refinished or engineered

By Stacey Wiedower—Special to The Commercial Appeal

Kathy Forrester loved the hardwood floors that ran throughout the downstairs of her 22-year-old Covington, TN, home. The carpet in her master suite? Not so much.

So when she opted last year to renovate her master bath, Forrester decided to take the project one step further: She replaced her bedroom flooring to match the oak floors she loved in her other rooms.

"It's just very clean, it's pretty, it's easy to take care of," she said. "And it looks good forever."

As a floor covering choice, hardwood is as traditional and timeless as it comes. But over the decades, trends have shifted, product lines have expanded, and, like everything else, wood floors have gone in and out as the pinnacle of high fashion.

Right now, they're definitely in—and the darker, the better.

"I love the dark hardwoods," said Ami Austin, owner of Memphis-based Ami Austin Interior Design. "I think a very dark hardwood floor just looks so sophisticated."

Leigh Shannon, referral marketing specialist for Memphis-based distributor Forest to Floor, said finish requests are getting darker and darker.

"People are staining them to look completely black," she said. "You can pair them with white walls and make a space look bigger."

Shannon, a fifth-generation member of her family's hardwood manufacturing and distributing businesses, said hand-scraped, distressed hardwood floors are equally hot. But, she added, quality among distressed finishes can vary widely.



"Hand-scraping is going to have a better look to it," she said, noting that her family's manufacturing company, Shamrock Plank Flooring, sends its boards out to be distressed by hand. "If a floor has been scraped by a machine, you'll see 'corn rows,' or the same pattern across all the boards."

Floors distressed not only by hand, but also by time and use, are also all the rage. In these days of "reduce, reuse, recycle," there's no greener way to go in a renovation project than to make the most of a home's existing floors.

"We're salvaging a lot of floors," said Bill Jackson, owner of Midtown Hardwood & Tile. "In Midtown, a lot of homes are 80 to 100 years old. When you go over the top of (original flooring), you're changing the integrity of that house. And there's no way, really, to replace that. Why not deal with a bit of a stain here and there? It's like when you look at an adobe wall and it's not perfectly square. That's part of its natural grace. That's the part you come to appreciate."

A similar patina can be achieved in newer homes through the use of reclaimed wood. Shannon said a number of lines these days offer hardwoods taken from old barns and other demolished buildings.

"At Shamrock, we took heart pine beams from an old Kentucky distillery," she said. "People like that distressed look, but they also like the story behind it. They like knowing it used to be somewhere else and now it's on their floors. They like the nail holes and wormholes, even."

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As far as green options go, hardwood sometimes gets a bad rap. Critics point to perceived problems in the logging industry as reasons to steer away from wood flooring. However, Jackson said, "in the grand scheme, that's a minor percentage."

"In your exotics, you may occasionally have things slip through, especially when it's coming from areas susceptible to poaching," he said. "When you're looking at using something like that, in my humble opinion, you need to minimize the amount you're using. You can use those woods predominantly as accent pieces."

For example, in the Mud Island home of custom builder Bob Burditt, Jackson installed primarily white oak flooring. But in the dining room, he laid it in a herringbone pattern set off by a border of Brazilian cherry.

"I love the look," Burditt said of the hardwood floors that run throughout his entire main floor. "It will last a long time if I take care of it. And years from now, if it shows wear, I can refinish it and bring it back to life."

Something not many consumers realize, Shannon said, is that engineered flooring options now on the market can handle rough wear and take a new finish the same way solid wood floors can. Again, she stressed, quality and content vary widely, so homeowners should do some research to figure out how a floor is made and whether it's right for their lifestyle before investing in an engineered product.

"They need to turn it to the side and see how much of the actual wood species is there," she said.

The thicker the layer of hardwood and the higher the number of plies, or layers, the better the chance the floor will take heavy wear and be susceptible to refinishing. And the benefits of engineered flooring can be great, said custom builder and remodeler Warren Ayres.

Ayres, owner of Warren Ayres Builder, recently installed engineered hardwood in an East Memphis home to save on both materials and budget.

"With a concrete floor, to lay hardwood on it you have to put down a moisture barrier and a three-quarter-inch plywood and then three-quarter-inch solid wood flooring," he said.

By installing an engineered product that had its subfloor built in, his home buyers saved on materials and installation costs. What they didn't sacrifice, Ayres said, was quality.

"When you see the product right next to the real product, you can't tell the difference," he said.

Whether engineered floors, solid woods, exotics or rapidly renewable bamboo, homeowners are using hardwoods as much as or even more than in the past—and in rooms throughout the house, not just entries, living and dining rooms.

"We're seeing a lot of people trending back to putting wood in the kitchen," Jackson said.

Austin stressed that function must come first, so think twice about installing a sleek, dark floor if you have four dogs, or consider how you'd handle a dishwasher overflow before putting wood in the kitchen.

Or if, like me, you have a child who loves to tear through the house on a tricycle, think about a hand-scraped, distressed finish that looks even better with wear. Whatever your family's needs, there's likely a wood product on today's market that can meet it.

"There's such a wide variety of species out there—colors, textures, grains, patterns," Shannon said. "We're trying to get the message out there to look around, to get what you want. And the price won't kill you."

Stacey Wiedower is a home and design writer and residential interior designer. Read more from her at designinsider.blogspot.com.