

# TAKE A WALK ON THE GREEN SIDE



In Mike and Pam Hummel's house, the floors, the stones on the fireplace, and the beams on the ceiling are all reclaimed.

**ECO-FRIENDLY OPTIONS ABOUND WHEN IT COMES TO WHAT'S UNDER YOUR FEET. HERE, LOCAL EXPERTS DISH THE HARD FACTS ABOUT ALTERNATIVE WOOD FLOORING.**

WRITTEN BY **KELLI ROSEN**

When Mike and Pam Hummel purchased their home in Round Hill, VA, they were fortunate to have stumbled across a builder, **Carter Morrow** of **Bay Homes**, who included reclaimed wood floors in a portion of the home. The Hummels were so impressed with their appearance, as well as the fact that they were recycled, that the couple extended the fence-board oak floors throughout their entire home. "It's a great look, very rustic – it looks like it belongs in an older country home, which is exactly the look we were trying to achieve," Mike says. "And the fact that it is good for the planet is a great byproduct of the decision."

Long gone are the days when environmentally conscious folks had to sacrifice aesthetics for their ecological beliefs. Today, consumers can choose from among a plethora of planks, including bamboo, cork, reclaimed, and exotic. And they all add beauty and

value to your home without taxing the planet's resources. Because there's something for everyone's décor, experts recommend finding what you like first and, if it isn't already eco-friendly, simply track down its sustainable counterpart.

## **Bamboo: Fast Growing and Durable**

Perhaps the most popular option in today's market is bamboo. Hardwood trees, such as oak and maple, require decades to grow to maturity. Bamboo, however, is derived from a sustainable plant that matures in less than six years. Although pricier than conventional hardwoods, it's harder than oak and, compared to maple, more dimensionally stable, which means it shrinks and swells less, thus helping to resist warping and gapping. So if you demand a lot from your flooring, bamboo may well be worth the price tag.

Bamboo is available in two patterns: the horizontal pattern showcases the plant's nodes, making it more unique than conventional hardwood patterns, whereas in the vertical pattern, the

Photographs courtesy of ecostrong



Bamboo floors are available in two shades, Natural and Caramel, and two grain patterns, Horizontal and Vertical. Ecostrong's Vertical Caramel floor hides the knots of the bamboo and is aesthetically appealing for its smooth characteristics.



Bamboo floors are an eco-friendly alternative to hardwood floors. Ecostrong's Horizontal Caramel from Ecofinishes accentuates the bamboo plant's thin striations.



Brazilian Cherry's grain is renowned for its hardness and its natural deep rich auburn tones.



Add a modern touch to your living room with Ecostrong's Orient Crossing Solid Vertical bamboo floors in Caramel. The golden tones of the floor complement the vertical grain pattern.



Photograph courtesy of Natural Cork

Cork, derived from the bark of the cork oak tree, is another eco-friendly alternative for floors. Cork's elastic, "bounce back" quality prevents scratches from furniture while offering warmth and noise reduction characteristics. Natural Cork Marmol 12-inch x 12-inch tiles.

plant's thin striations are absent. If you are considering bamboo, experts suggest working with a reputable distributor because the material has become so popular that now substandard products, namely ones using immature stalks and poor quality glues, are ubiquitous. Hank Kasindorf, president of Ecofinishes, in Alexandria, VA, recommends choosing bamboo that's accompanied by a commercial warranty.

**Cork: Absorbs Sound, Feels Comfy**

In addition to bamboo, cork has become a hot commodity in sustainable flooring. "Cork flooring has been around for more than 100 years but has recently experienced a resurgence in popularity because of the ease of installation," Kasindorf says. David Rowe, showroom manager at Nash Floors Company, Inc. in Rockville, MD, estimates one out of every three orders at his store is for cork. "I could close the showroom and put two samples in my hands – one of bamboo and one of cork – and stand on the street all day and sell them," he says.

Available in several natural colors, cork requires peeling off just 8 to 10 inches of the bark, which grows back in a mere seven years. So by utilizing rotating crops, trees continue to grow and contribute to the ecosystem. Recent advances in laminate technology have also boosted the appeal of cork because now it's a cinch to install. Layered planks (fiber board sandwiched between layers of cork) are snapped together to form a floating floor that is sound absorbing and more comfortable to walk on than traditional hardwoods.

**Reclaimed Wood: Rustic, Eco-Friendly**

Reclaimed, or recycled, wood has also skyrocketed in popularity, especially for homeowners seeking a rustic feel, like the Hummels. "Most customers who want a reclaimed floor want it because of the look, but

the added comfort that it has been recycled can sometimes be the deciding factor," says John Watson, project manager at Loudoun Valley Floors in Purcellville, VA.

"Reclaimed wood also allows you to utilize species of wood that are no longer available," says Kasindorf, who points to the example of chestnut most often reclaimed from barns in Australia. "It has a tendency to look rustic and distressed because of all the worm and nail holes." Because of limited quantities, some reclaimed woods can be very expensive, upwards of \$20 per square foot just for the materials. Other options, such as fence-board oak, are less expensive. "Reclaimed wood is extremely hard and durable and able to mask lots of wear and tear," adds Watson, "so it's good for higher traffic areas."

**Exotics from Well-Managed Forests**

When it comes to exotics, such as Brazilian cherry or Patagonian teak, purchasing certified wood products may help ease your conscience. In the past, exotics were notorious for their lack of sustainability, but all of that has changed, thanks to organizations such as the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC), a non-profit organization dedicated to encouraging the responsible management of the world's forests, and BR-111, a manufacturer monitored by the Brazilian Institute of the Environment and Natural Resources. Those manufacturers receiving the FSC coveted stamp of approval have met the organization's high standards, which include replanting trees and avoiding soil erosion.

For homeowners who cannot bear the thought of adorning their floors with anything but traditional oak or maple, don't despair. You still have the power to make a difference. "Be sure to use materials derived from forests managed in an environmentally-friendly way, particularly those certified by the FSC," advises Mark Bisbee, owner of GreenFloors in Fairfax, VA. "Plus there is no real price difference between products derived from a certified forest and those from a non-certified one."

So whichever sustainable flooring option you choose – even if it is primarily for aesthetics – rest assured you're taking a step in the right direction toward preserving the earth's resources. **ws**

RESOURCES

■ **Ecofinishes**  
To the trade only  
703.370.2690  
ecofinishes.com

■ **GreenFloors**  
703.352.8300  
greenfloors.com

■ **Loudoun Valley Floors**  
540.338.4300  
loudounvalleyfloors.com

■ **Nash Floors Company Inc.**  
301.881.0004  
nashfloors.com



Photograph by Amy Morisse

**No Shoes, Please**

Asking guests to remove their shoes prior to entering your home can be awkward, probably because it's not a common practice in this country. Throughout the world, however, it is considered de rigeur to go sans shoes when indoors, especially throughout Asia and Scandinavia. Cambodians, for example, remove their footwear as a sign of respect for elders and to maintain quiet. In Japan, where homes were originally designed for sitting and sleeping near the floor, shoes are removed for sanitary reasons.

But following in the stocking-ed footsteps of the international community can offer some real benefits for us, too. No shoes means no dirt and grime, thus potentially prolonging the life of carpets and floors. When it comes to personal health, studies have shown that removing shoes can greatly reduce the amount of contaminants. In 1991, the EPA released the "Doormat Study," which found that when there was a doormat at the entrance and shoes were not worn, there was a whopping 60 percent reduction in the amount of lead dust and chemicals tracked throughout the home. The number of allergens and bacteria were reduced as well.

To help ease the conversion of your home into a shoe-free zone, consider posting a sign near front and side doors, where guests are most likely to enter. This will serve as a gentle reminder and perhaps be less offensive than a direct verbal request. Purchase an attractive piece of furniture to store shoes, such as a specially designed shoe cupboard or storage bench. Finally, always provide warm, clean slippers or fresh socks as a way to make your guests feel comfy when visiting.

– Kelli Rosen