

Wakefield Plantation

m a g a z i n e



FEATURE ARTICLE

Kitchen & Bath Counter Intelligence

Wakefield

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Pity the poor countertop. It takes more abuse than anything in your house except the floor and remote control. Knife scratches. Juice stains. Burns. Makeup marks ...

Counters are also, however, major contributors to the design of your kitchen and baths. Surfaces should not only be chosen based on their aesthetic appeal, but also for their degree of durability. And if you have your eye on that bottom line, don't worry. According to the National Association of Home Builders, the kitchen is the only room in the house that returns more than your investment—111 percent, as a matter of fact.

Formica and Other Laminates - "Laminate doesn't automatically mean 'looks cheap,'" said Hank Wall, president of Wood Wise Design & Remodeling in Raleigh. "Lots of people still use laminates, and the trend now is to give them real finishing touches. For example, we'll run a rail down the edge to make it rounded. A wood edge that matches the floor or cabinet gives the entire room a pulled-together, finished quality. The trend is going away from sharp edges and corners in both the kitchen and bath."

Formica and other laminate countertop materials are your best bet if you're remodeling your own kitchen or bath, or trying to keep down prices. Made of a plastic veneer glued to particleboard, a laminated counter lasts about seven years. Today's laminates are more durable than they were a few decades ago. They're more stain- and abrasion-resistant, but are still relatively easy to burn or scratch. Pooled water can cause laminate to peel around the seams and, unfortunately, the only solution for damage is to replace it.

However, laminates cost between \$33 and \$70 per linear foot (widths being standard) and are available in an enormous variety of colors and textures. "Most people want a speckled finish that isn't glossy so it hides crumbs and drops of water," Wall said. "You have to be fastidious to have a highly polished countertop."

Solid Surfaces - The benefit of a solid surface is simple enough: it's a solid 1/2-inch thick. If you scratch or burn it, you can use a fine-grade sandpaper to get rid of the mark. A blend of natural materials and acrylic resins and/or polymer plastics, solid-surface countertops tend to be light in color and have a warm and inviting matte finish. Solid surfaces are known by name brands such as DuPont Corian, Wisonart and Swanstone, and since they are non-porous, they don't trap bacteria and are very easy to clean.

"A solid surface like Corian is easily renewed and repaired," said Tim Wilson, marketing manager for the builder's segment for DuPont, a national supplier for Greensboro-based Central Wholesale Supply. "With a Scotch Brite pad and some elbow grease, you can easily get your countertops looking like new and erase any scratch."

Unlike laminates, solid surfaces have inconspicuous seams. Sinks can be integrated into Corian counters so there's no lip to catch dirt, as with standard drop-in or under-mount sinks in other materials. In fact, solid surface isn't just for countertops anymore. Since it's easy to heat and mold, solid surface material such as Corian is showing up in columns, desktops, window sills, chairs and especially showers, because there's no need to grout and no substance to foster mildew. Since the material becomes translucent at 1/4 inch, you can also use it in lighting fixtures or even sliding doors.

"I was a custom woodworker for years, but I have a ball with solid surfaces," said Pete Peters, owner of Tooth and Nail in Raleigh. "There are so many unique ways of using it. I've cut an ivy pattern in the corner of a vanity, used a checkerboard design in an island, the head in a boat—one homeowner wanted me to create swans for the cooking area because there were swans in the backyard."

Prices vary, but solid surface is expensive compared to laminate, starting at about \$100 per linear foot. Corian solid surfaces are available in more than 90 colors, with about 10 or 11 added each year.

Quartz Surfaces - The benefit of quartz surfaces, also known as engineered stone surfaces, is try as you might, it's almost impossible to scratch. Quartz surfaces combine quartz with silica sands to create a distinctive, radiant look with colors both inspired by nature and more vibrant tones. DuPont Zodiaq® is the only quartz surface product that combines 93 percent pure quartz crystals with a polymer to create a non-porous surface. It's even more stain- and scratch-resistant than solid surface materials, and therefore offers a more seamless appearance.

Like solid surfaces, quartz surfaces are non-porous and therefore don't trap bacteria and are easy to clean. And because quartz is a hard material, scoring 7 out of 10 on the Moh's hardness scale, with diamond being a 10, DuPont Zodiaq® is extremely scratch-resistant. "Zodiaq® is an alternative for consumers who like dark, hard and shiny surfaces," Wilson said. "Natural products such as granite, limestone and marble are all porous, so if you get an element such as wine or vinegar on it, it stains and is difficult to get out. Zodiaq® always has that just-installed look, and you don't have to worry about whether its surface will resist stains or whether it's time to reseal."

Quartz surfaces cost about \$50 to \$65 per square foot, or \$125 to \$160 per linear foot. Zodiaq®'s 17 current colors range from natural tones to vibrant colors like Celestial Blue and Indus Red.

Granite, Marble, Limestone and Slate - The popularity of decorating with neutral colors and earth tones has spilled over into homeowners wanting natural-surface countertops such as granite, limestone, slate and marble. Rebecca Lopez, vice president of Ceramique Tile and Stone in Raleigh, said her company is as likely to install slate counters as tile. And Raleigh-based Heritage Remodel and Design, which handles the interior design for many homes in Wakefield Plantation, has seen a huge jump in interest for granite.

Although it needs to be treated with a penetrating sealer before using it as a countertop, with reapplications necessary once a year, granite offers a durable, high-gloss surface that's scratch- and burn-resistant. You're also not necessarily limiting your color palette by using it in your kitchen or bath.

Ubatuba is a dark green, Violeta is beige, Blue Pearl is, of course, blue, and there are dozens of black shades from charcoal to ebony. The cost varies according to its place of origin but, in general, prices have dropped from around \$300 per linear foot to between \$100 and \$150.

“Calvasina USA has introduced a Solos line of 1-centimeter thick granite, as opposed to the usual 3 centimeters,” said Becky Rutledge of Heritage Remodel and Design’s sales and marketing department. “It offers the same look as the usual granite, but is at a competitive price to solid surface. It’s available in 10 colors but, like carpet dye lots, you need to be careful that your slabs of granite match.”

Limestone varies in hardness and, like granite, is porous and requires sealing. Prices range from \$35 to \$75 per square foot, or \$87 to \$185 per linear foot. Slate is more resistant to abrasion than limestone, since scratches can generally be erased with a damp sponge or steel-wool pad. Vermont slate is non-porous, but colors are limited. Prices range from \$65 to \$80 per square foot, or \$160 to \$200 per linear foot.

Tile, Concrete and Stainless Steel - If you want a unique or eclectic look for your kitchen or bath, consider using an unusual countertop material typically found only in commercial sites, such as tile, concrete or stainless steel. “Tile is more of a specialty item,” Lopez said. “But porcelain is a very good alternative to solid granite if you want the look of granite, but can’t afford it.”

Tiles are made of ceramic or porcelain and are bonded with adhesive and grout. Tile countertops became popular along with the Mediterranean style, and many tiled counters and backsplashes incorporate a hand-painted design for a truly unique look. Both ceramic and porcelain tiles are extremely heat-resistant, and stain-resistant if properly treated. However, they require a lot of maintenance and are fairly easy to chip and break. They’re also among the most expensive surfaces, costing upwards of \$5 per square foot.

Concrete sounds like the last thing you’d want in a kitchen or bath, but it can be tinted, stamped or inlaid with tile or other objects for a distinctive style. With a cost of about \$180 to \$375 per linear foot, make sure you’re working with an experienced craftsman when it’s installed or you’ll end up with stress fractures.

Stainless steel offers the look of a professional kitchen for about \$180 to \$375 per linear foot. While it shows smudges and fingerprints and can be scratched fairly easily, stainless steel is also a breeze to clean and practically impossible to burn or stain.

Mix and Match - Pity the poor homeowner who’s trying to decide between the durability of solid surface and the gloss of polished granite, or the price of laminate and the beauty of slate. A lot of homeowners have decided not to choose just one. A mix-and-match style is infiltrating today’s kitchens, in which the wide expanse of countertops is made of solid surface, for example, while a work island, where most of the slicing and chopping is done, is created in a durable Zodiaq® or granite surface. “People are showing off their expensive stuff in the middle of the kitchen, and choosing the other countertops in the same shade or a complementary color,” Wall said.

While you can’t really prevent the knife scratches, juice stains, burns and makeup marks that descend on your countertops, you can control what

they land on. It's worth the price to invest in surfaces that will not only return your investment, but simplify your life and beautify your home as well. MW

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