

Under Your Feet, the Floor Show

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SOMETIMES neither wood, tile nor carpeting seems like the right choice for a floor. An alternative worth considering is laminate.

“Laminates are probably the most exciting change the flooring industry has seen in the last decade,” said Tom Kraeutler, who is a host of The Money Pit, a radio show, and with his co-host, Leslie Segrete, author of “My Home, My Money Pit: Your Guide to Every Home Improvement Adventure” (Globe Pequot Press, 2008).

Bill Dearing, president of the North American Laminate Flooring Association in Washington, said laminates account for 18 to 21 percent of the retail flooring market for residential remodeling. And since 1993, he said, sales of laminates have increased by more than 10 percent nearly every year.

Mr. Kraeutler explained that earlier versions of laminate flooring were difficult to install because as each strip of flooring was laid, the tongue and groove connection required gluing and clamping of the joints.

Laminate flooring available now, he said, is much easier to use. Glue is no longer needed as the adjoining boards snap into place, and it is also more visually appealing, with hundreds of patterns to choose from. “A laminate floor can look like any kind of wood, stone, tile, vinyl, or just about any other flooring material available,” he said. Paul Murfin, vice president of sales for Armstrong Floor Products in Lancaster, Pa., said the flooring can be anywhere from 7 to 12 millimeters thick and can have a smooth or textured finish. With laminate that looks like stone, the surface can have a stone-like texture; laminate that looks like wood could have a raised grain. Early laminates had a tendency to produce a hollow “clippity-clop” sound when walked on with shoes. Newer laminates, particularly thicker ones, eliminate that sound. In addition, Mr. Murfin said, laminates are free-floating surfaces. They are not glued to the subfloor but rest on foam.

Amberlee Virgili, a customer service representative for FloorOne.com, an online retailer of laminate flooring products, said her company sells about 16 brands of laminate flooring, with prices from less than \$1 a square foot to about \$5 a square foot.

Bob Middleton, technical and installation manager at Lumber Liquidators, a nationwide retailer of flooring products based in Toano, Va., said consumers should look at a product’s warranty. Laminate floors can carry warranties of 10, 20 or 30 years, he said.

Mr. Dearing of Nalfa said, “The best thing to do is to try to look at a display floor.” That is particularly helpful, he added, when a homeowner is considering a laminate floor with a textured finish. Another thing a homeowner can do is visit the organization’s Web site at www.nalfa.com. The organization has established a set of voluntary standards for laminate manufacturers. Manufacturers then submit their products to the organization and can obtain a certificate, usually depicted on the packaging, that indicates that the product in the box meets Nalfa standards.

One final question that many homeowners may ask is whether laminates are right for do-it-yourselfers.

“Absolutely,” said Bob Markovich, home and yard editor for Consumer Reports in Yonkers. Mr. Markovich said his organization tested and reviewed 41 flooring products for its August issue, including a large number of laminates. “If you’re looking for flooring that’s reasonably priced, tough and realistic-looking, and you want to install it yourself, laminates are the way to go,” he said.

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