

Counter Culture



From granite to concrete, to paper-resin and glass composites, the range of countertop materials on the market is wider than ever. Visit a showroom to see first hand what various materials look like and how they feel to the touch. Beyond color and design, each material has specific attributes that you need to consider when making your selection. Here's a rundown of some of the surfaces you're likely to see or hear about.

Natural Stone

Natural stone is durable, beautiful, stands up to hot cookware, and may be reused or recycled. If possible, choose stone quarried from a local source to lessen the impact of transporting it. Natural stone should be treated with non-toxic or food grade sealants for use in kitchens. However, stone is not easy to repair, and its heavy weight needs to be taken into account in how cabinets are structured.

Engineered Stone

Sometimes known as manufactured stone, this material is designed to look like granite and is available in many colors. It's non-staining, heat tolerant, and its hardness means it's difficult to scratch. Unlike natural stone, engineered stone needs no sealing or other treatments. Keep in mind, however, that this material is manufactured from non-renewable resources and often requires shipping from distant manufacturers.

Paper-resin Composite

Paper-resin composites are manufactured by bonding recycled paper or pulp from sustainable wood sources with resin to form a sleek, durable countertop surface. Manufacturing processes aim to be as environmentally friendly as possible. The range of available colors is still limited. It's heat resistant and small scratches or cuts can be repaired. The major brands available today are PaperStone® and Richlite®.

Recycled Glass Composite

Striking in appearance, these composites are made of recycled glass chips embedded in a masonry binder. Depending on the manufacturer, between 75% and 90% of the glass is post-consumer material. It is available in almost limitless combinations of glass and binder colors. Glass composites are hard, heat resistant and durable. Leading manufacturers include Vetrazzo and IceStone®.

Butcher Block/Wood

Butcher Block is a great work surface for food preparation – it's easy on knives during cutting and chopping, and can be treated with food-grade oil for lasting beauty. Cut or scratched surfaces can be renewed by sanding. Most butcher block is now made from renewable sources, but ask about its origins from your supplier. Wood is generally not the best choice around sinks as it is subject to water damage, but it can make a great countertop for an island or other work surfaces.

Stainless Steel

If you seek a sleek industrial look, nothing compares to stainless steel countertops. Durable, heat proof, and recyclable, stainless is commonly installed over a plywood base, so ask for FSC certified (vs. conventional) plywood. This material is susceptible to scratching and can dent if not thick enough. Stainless steel with a brushed finish resists smudges and fingerprints better than a highly polished finish.

Tile

Development of green manufacturing processes that also incorporate recycled glass or porcelain is ongoing. Available in an almost infinite range of colors and patterns, tile also lends itself to creative design. Specialty or handcrafted tiles can be interspersed with solid colored, mass-manufactured tiles for an artistic, custom look on counters or backsplashes. Tile has an uneven surface that can abrade with use, and grout can be difficult to clean and may need to be repaired over time.

Concrete

Like natural stone, poured concrete is tough and handles heat without suffering surface damage. Color can be integrated into the wet mix, guaranteeing deep, lasting color. Sealing is required, so look for non-toxic formulations.

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Remodeling Green

Nearly everyone recognizes that green is good. But what does a green remodel really mean?



Generally, green remodeling refers to projects that have an environmentally friendly, resource conserving focus to their design, purpose, and results. Green remodels usually use resource efficient construction and finish materials, (e.g. sustainable, renewable, or recycled), incorporate energy saving heating, cooling, and lighting systems, and use water-wise fixtures and efficient appliances. The use of low- or non-toxic materials for everything from furniture to paint is also a hallmark of a green approach. Well-planned green remodels can also result in a decreased need to use harsh chemical cleaners to maintain the home and fewer airborne toxins and allergens. While some elements of a green remodel may mean more costs invested up front, the resulting energy and resource savings, greater durability, and reduced maintenance can mean your investment will more than pay for itself over the years ahead, both financially and environmentally.

Many experts caution consumers to take into account the environmental impact of shipping raw or finished materials – green or conventional – over long distances. For example, reclaimed wood, specialized fixtures, and some manufactured products may often be excellent choices, but their green benefits can be significantly reduced or even negated by the resources used in transporting them from afar.

There are currently no national standards that define a green remodel. With new materials and systems being discovered and developed all the time, contractors, designers, and homeowners alike need to educate themselves on the many ways a green approach can be incorporated into a project. By doing your homework and making wise choices, you can help ensure that your green remodel – major or minor – will benefit your home, your family, and the world around us.

The Greening of the Kitchen

The kitchen is not only the heartbeat of the home, but is also the place where many innovative products and materials can easily be incorporated. Whether you're considering a brand-new kitchen or perhaps just making a few changes, there are many excellent ways to bring green into this most important space. Here are some green guidelines for the major elements of a kitchen remodel.



Appliances and Energy Efficiency

A kitchen remodel usually means you'll be replacing all of your appliances. Making smart choices when selecting new appliances

provides the opportunity not only to have the kitchen better suit the way you use it, but can mean significant savings on your energy bills. By some estimates, the kitchen can account for up to 40% of a home's energy costs, so it's a good place to focus on energy efficiency.

First, evaluate what you actually need. Does that giant refrigerator you saw at the showroom or in a neighbor's home really make sense for your own kitchen? How about that super-capacity dishwasher you've had your eye on? These types of appliances operate most efficiently when they are full. Oversized appliances that

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are truly more than you will use or need can mean a huge initial investment and use more energy than models that will better suit your needs.

Whether you decide to go for the oversized appliances or realize that scaled-back versions would work just fine for you, choose from models that carry the Energy Star® label. This means the item meets or exceeds guidelines for energy efficiency. The more efficient the appliance, the more energy and cost savings you will have over the long run.

Cabinets

Cabinetry is one of the most visible and dramatic components of a kitchen remodel. It is also often the most expensive item on the materials list. The first thing to consider is whether you need all new cabinets, or whether reconfiguring, resurfacing, and/or adding to your existing cabinet setup will work just as well for you. You'll save resources and expense by going that route.

If you are replacing your cabinets, look for those constructed of materials that are friendly to the environment inside your home as well as the environment at large. Visit showrooms to get ideas and learn more about the range of materials and looks available in this category. Green choices include resin-reinforced medium density fiberboard, or MDF, that has been specially manufactured without formaldehyde. Products made from conventional MDF or other materials containing formaldehyde can continue to emit irritating fumes into your home for years. New materials known as wheatboard or strawboard are made from excess material resulting from the agricultural production of grain. This material is formaldehyde-free and can be finished or veneered for a custom look.

Look What's Underfoot

Kitchen floors need to be durable, low-maintenance, comfortable to stand on, and of course, look great. The biggest story in environmentally sound flooring has centered around materials produced from renewable resources. The most popular and widely available of these include cork and solid bamboo. Bamboo has a beautiful, narrow grain and a warm look, needs little care, and can be a great choice for a dining area, too. For the greatest durability and performance, use solid bamboo planks rather than composites

that have a wood core. Sealed or waxed cork flooring can be great for the kitchen floor. It's wonderfully resilient and quiet, resists mold and mildew, and requires little maintenance beyond sweeping and damp mopping. All that, and it's sustainable, too.

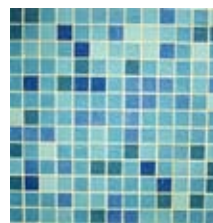
Remember your grandmother's linoleum floor? Not to be confused with vinyl flooring often referred to as linoleum, the real thing is seeing a resurgence in popularity among designers and architects. Made from natural materials including linseed oil mixed with wood or cork by-products and backed with fabric, the best linoleum is colored all the way through and is extremely durable (that's why grandma kept that floor all those years). Look for quality linoleum with richly pigmented color that will complement the look of your kitchen.

Whatever new flooring you choose, be sure to have it installed by a qualified contractor with experience in working with that particular material. The material and condition of the existing floor or substrate will factor into the performance of your new floor, so skillful installation is essential to floors you'll enjoy for years to come.

Clean Air Act

While hardly the most glamorous part of a kitchen remodel, ventilation is nonetheless an important part of how well your kitchen will function. Ventilation hoods and the increasingly popular downdraft fan systems must be properly installed to work as designed and to prevent the circulation of exhaust from gas-powered furnace and water heaters into other parts of the home. Many states have specific code requirements for kitchen ventilation systems; your contractor should be knowledgeable about any such regulations.

Good ventilation in the kitchen goes beyond the range hood. Windows that can be opened to facilitate air exchange are an easy and cost-effective way to increase ventilation and can reduce the likelihood of mold and mildew forming. Proper ventilation can also lessen the effects of off-gassing from some materials and finishes that may have been used in the kitchen and elsewhere in the home.



The Water-Wise Bath

Whether you plan to turn a master bath into your own private retreat or are simply updating a powder room, a remodeled bathroom is one of the wonderful pleasures of home. The bath is a perfect place to incorporate green elements that fit your needs and lifestyle while getting the look and functionality you want. Water-saving fixtures and systems will have a positive impact on resource use and are the easiest places to start when planning your new bath.

Showers

By some estimates, 20% - 25% of indoor water use happens in the shower. Fortunately there are some relatively simple solutions that will go a long way to conserving water in the shower. The most obvious are low-flow showerheads,

which can use as little as 1.5 gallons per minute while providing a strong-feeling flow. Low flow showerheads are now available in many designer looks and finishes, so you're bound to find one that will look great in your new bath.

A showerhead shutoff control is another way to keep water use in check. This inexpensive device allows you reduce the shower flow at the push of a button while you shampoo or soap up. Another press restores the flow. Of course, keep showers short in order to realize even greater water savings.

Toilets

The most purely functional fixture in the bath has come a long way since they routinely used 5 or more gallons of water per flush. Current models must use 1.6 or fewer gallons per flush. Even so, according to the U. S. Environmental Protection Agency Americans flush approximately 9,000 gallons of water each year per person. There are also newer designs called dual flush systems, which can perform either a full or half flush on demand. Be sure to compare the water consumption rates and performance effectiveness of various brands and models before you decide on new toilets.

Water Heaters

A bath remodel may provide an excellent opportunity to replace an older, water- and energy-wasting tank heater. New tankless water heaters heat water on demand, unlike conventional heaters that waste energy by keeping a storage tank full of water hot even which it's not needed. Another type of system cuts down on the amount of water wasted while you wait for the hot water to come out of the faucet. Basically, these water circulating systems work by rapidly moving the water already standing in the house's pipes back into the water heater once the faucet is turned on, so the hot water is delivered very quickly where it's needed. These efficient circulating systems can be incorporating into either new or existing plumbing systems.

Various types of solar water heaters are also available. In these systems, a roof-mounted solar energy collector uses the sun's energy to heat water before it enters your water heater, so the heater provides hot water much more efficiently. Solar systems are effective even in cool or cloudy climates.

