

HOW DO I CHOOSE A COUNTERTOP?

There are so many options for countertops today that it's difficult to know what might work best for your needs and budget. Granite continues to be the one of the most popular materials used for kitchen countertops. National Kitchen and Bath Association market research manager Ed Pell notes that a survey his association did of 22,000 remodelers in August of 2008 found that 30 percent of countertops were granite, 33 percent laminate, and 16 percent solid surface, including quartz or Corian. Other counter surfaces include stainless steel, concrete, wood, tile and soapstone. All have pros and cons, and fall in a wide range of price points. Here is a brief summary (along with some approximate budgeting figures) that you may find helpful.

Laminate (\$10-\$50/sq ft installed) - Laminate is the most economical of all countertop options and is the most common choice. Laminate is a paper image that is subjected to high heat and pressure to create a thin veneer, which is then laminated to a particle board substrate. Complex shapes for countertops are possible using wood or solid surface edged laminates. Straight runs with mitred corners are most common. Laminates are available in almost limitless range of colours, patterns and textures. They are stain resistant, but are not heat, chip, or scratch resistant. Excessive moisture by a sink or at mitred corners may cause the surface to peel away from the backing, and the engineered wood beneath the surface will permanently swell if it becomes wet. New technologies allow undermount sink installation, and new varied edge profiles are available. Brand names include Formica and Wilsonart.

Ceramic Tile (\$10-\$50+/sq ft installed) - Ceramic tile is a very versatile building material. Its uses are many: flooring, wall tile, shower/tub surrounds, tub decks, around fireplaces, and even countertops. Ceramic tiles are heat and scratch resistant, and come in endless colours and price ranges. It can be an inexpensive and elegant option. It may not be the best choice if you are looking for a low maintenance surface; tiles can break, chip or crack, the surface is irregular, and grout is easily stained if not sealed regularly.

Cultured Granite and Marble (\$20-\$45/sq ft installed) - Cultured granite and marble is a versatile building material, very cost effective with a wide range of colour options. Uses include vanity tops with integrated sinks, shower bases, tub/shower/wall panels, soaker tub decks, baseboards, window sills and trim, and even kitchen countertops. Cultured stone is a composite product made of 75% marble stone and 25% resin and pigments. It scratches easily and lavatory sinks have been known to crack in the past, but new formulations have made it more durable and it is a renewable surface. Scratches can be polished out and even small chips can be repaired. This product is non-porous and easy to clean. It is seamless and there is no waste in the manufacturing process as each part is custom moulded to the customers' specifications.

Wood (\$50-\$130 per square foot) - Typical countertop woods include maple, oak, mahogany, walnut and teak, but many more species are available. All can be stained and provide a rich, warm look. Regular sealing is required; water, heat, and stains cause damage over time, and wood scratches and dents easily. It is easy to clean, imperfections can be sanded and resealed, and wood is a natural bacteria inhibitor. Custom fabrication is needed for special edge treatments; caulking needed where material meets backsplash.

Solid Surface (\$60-\$150+/sq ft installed) - Solid surfacing is a composite product of 66% natural minerals and 34% acrylic resin, with many colour options that are uniform throughout. It can be cut and machined to any configuration and any required seams are very discreet. Solid surfaces are beautiful and extremely popular. They are non-porous, easy to clean, and are renewable surfaces as scratches can be sanded and polished out. It can discolour with heat, and can be stained. Name brands include Corian and Megamite.

Engineered Stone (\$75-\$200/sq ft installed) - Combining up to 97% quartz with pigment, polymers and epoxy, this surface material provides an even-patterned natural stone look. Engineered stone is non-porous, antimicrobial, and is very durable in terms of stain, scratch, and heat resistance. It does not contain irregularities, pores, or cracks found in natural stone, and does not require sealing. It is easy to clean and will last a lifetime if properly cared for. Large countertops will require visible seams. Brand names include Cambria and Zodiaq.

Granite or other Natural Stone (\$65-\$200+/sq ft installed) - Pricing varies depending on the type of stone chosen, where it was quarried, and edge treatments. Common uses are countertops, vanity tops, thresholds (flooring), and around fireplaces. Natural stone surfaces are beautiful and rate high in terms of longevity. They are heat resistant, but can crack and will stain if subjected to soap scum or grease and oils. Natural stone must be sealed periodically to improve its resistance to stains, and any spills should

always be blotted immediately. Natural stone counters are cold and noisy, and are tough on breakables. Large countertops require a visible seam.

Soapstone (\$95/sq ft installed) - has a smooth soapy feeling. Primarily composed of talc, soapstone is light blue/gray when fresh from the quarry, but its surface darkens immediately with mineral oil and also oxidizes, deepening in color and developing an attractive patina. Soapstone is softer than marble or granite so it is easy to repair nicks and chips in its surface. Although soft, soapstone is durable: the nonporous surface will not stain or burn and is impervious to acids, a quality that has made it a popular choice for countertops in laboratories and darkrooms. Because the stone retains heat better than materials such as steel or enamel, the dishwasher stays hot longer, a quality that made soapstone a popular choice for sinks before the days of hot running water. Unlike marble or granite, soapstone does not require an epoxy coating to protect it from staining, and will last a lifetime.

Stainless Steel (\$100-200/sq ft installed) - For a contemporary, industrial look, this is the way to get a professional-style kitchen. It is antimicrobial, seamless, heat and stain resistant. It is easy to clean but does show scratches and fingerprints. It is also easily dented, and can be noisy and cold.

Concrete (\$55-100/sq ft) - considered a green product, every concrete countertop is a custom creation made from Portland cement, stone, sand, water, and pigment with optional inlays of metal, stone, or other embellishments. It is an all natural materials, scratch and heat resistant; durable; integral drain boards and sinks possible. It requires regular sealing and waxing, is easily scratched and susceptible to temperature changes. Custom fabrication is done in factory a setting or onsite, and it is poured and cured prior to installation.