

**H**ardwood and natural stone don't come cheap, but they have the potential to last a lifetime, acquiring a depth of character and patina that money can't buy. Both are surprisingly low in maintenance and they deliver many other practical benefits too.

## SOPHISTICATED STONE & WOOD

*The floor is literally the foundation of your home and has a huge impact both on style and basic practicality. Choose hardwood or natural stone for lasting character and performance and you won't regret the investment.*

## Stone

Natural stone brings a timeless beauty and a great sense of permanence to an interior. It's also fire and water-resistant and can be fully restored after flooding. No two slabs or tiles are alike, which gives stone flooring an inherent vitality. Stone looks different once it is laid, sealed and grouted, so always visit a showroom to view a tiled section before making up your mind. For the best quality stone, choose a supplier who sources directly from quarries.

Limestone – Light in tone and may display fossilized traces of shells or marine life. Choose a hard limestone for flooring, such as

one of the French varieties, which are more wear resistant and less porous.

Travertine – Long prized as a construction material for its hardness. Its honeycomb structure is revealed in small pits on the surface of the cut stone. These may be pre-filled with resin but do not affect performance.

Marble – Has a characteristic veined pattern. Extremely hard and durable. Ideal for creating graphic black and white patterns in an entrance hall or as a luxurious finish in a bathroom.

Slate – Easily split into thin slabs and tiles. Sleek 'wet look' due to the presence of mica. Riven slates that are calibrated (a smooth underside) are easier to lay.

Basalt – Very hard and black or near-black in colour. Textured surfaces are suitable for wet rooms.

Granite – Flecked or mottled crystalline appearance. Very hard and exceptionally wear resistant.

Avoid using highly polished stone on the floor – honed or riven

surfaces provide a better grip. 'Tumbling' or bushmilling blurs the edges of stone tiles and gives an aged distressed look.

Laying a stone floor is a professional job. The subfloor must be strong enough to bear the weight and be as rigid as possible to prevent subsequent cracking. If there is the possibility of floor movement, flexible adhesives and grouts must be used. Matching stone skirtings provide a neat finishing touch.

All stone is porous to a degree and must be sealed prior to laying to promote stain-resistance.

A stone floor that has been properly sealed requires little

maintenance beyond regular sweeping and mopping with a mild soap solution. Avoid strong detergents, which can damage seals. Wipe up spills as soon as they occur to avoid the risk of staining. To avoid resealing your stone floor regularly, dilute a small amount of sealant in your regular wash to keep the existing sealant fresh and topped up.

Warm, versatile and classically good looking, solid or engineered hardwood flooring has an unmistakable quality that cheap laminate lookalikes conspicuously lack. Stylistically, it is a great unifier, adds a visual warmth and is suitable almost anywhere in the home, although special care needs

to be taken in areas that are likely

to get wet. Like stone, hardwood is anti-bacterial and anti-static, which makes it good for allergy sufferers.

There are a huge number of species on the market, from temperate zone hardwoods such as oak, ash and maple, to tropical species such as wenge, padauk and ipe. Natural tones, which vary

widely, can be lightened by bleaching or darkened by smoking or 'fuming'. Steer clear of light-toned woods, such as ash, in areas of heavy traffic. Some hardwoods are more durable than others. Maple, for example is so tough it is often used in schools, museums and dance halls. Oak is a perennial favourite because it acquires a unique patina through time and

wear. Bamboo is a current trend and a green solution.

Boards range from narrow strips to broad planks – the choice is essentially aesthetic. Some stockists supply boards up to 12 metres long. In general, the thicker, wider and longer the boards, the higher the price.

For a lively patterned floor, try parquet or wood block, which can be laid in a range of designs from herringbone to basketweave. Marquetry borders or central medallions provide a special decorative flourish.

Antique or reclaimed hardwood is

at the very top end of the price range, for good reason. Many timbers change colour as they age, an effect that is difficult to simulate by applying a finish to new wood. In a period home, the floor will look like it has always been there. Most reclaimed timber comes from industrial, institutional or commercial premises. Sources include architectural salvage companies and specialists in reclaimed timber.

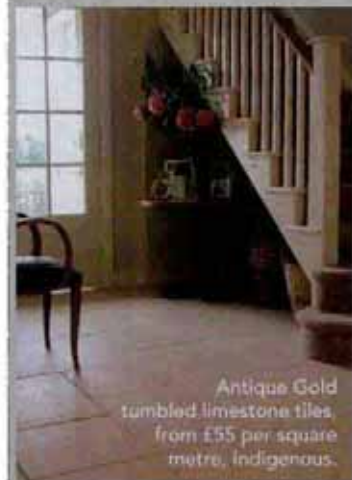
Most hardwood floors can be laid over concrete, timber joists or existing floorboards covered in hardboard, provided the subfloor is flat and dry. Always have a floor professionally installed. It is worth paying extra to have skirting boards removed and replaced to hide the expansion gap instead of covering it with beading which can cheapen the wood finish.

Sealing is necessary for all wood. Polyurethane and acrylic lacquers provide good protection, but they are not eco-friendly. Areas of wear cannot be subsequently patched without it looking obvious. Many suppliers recommend deep penetrating oils, which help to harden the wood while providing a moisture barrier. These are easier to renew. A top coat of wax is also advisable in areas that are likely to see more traffic.

Water is the great enemy of wood. Grit and stiletto heels damage seals and finishes, allowing water to penetrate. Keep floors swept, clean, dry and polished.

Tropical hardwoods are among the most durable, but many are endangered. Ensure the wood you buy is certified by the Forestry Stewardship Council that monitors projects around the world.

## UNDERFLOOR HEATING



If you are replacing a floor, it's the perfect time to think about installing underfloor heating, which has become an affordable luxury in recent years. New systems consist of very thin mats, placed directly beneath the flooring material, which means that the heating is very responsive.

Underfloor heating is ideal for warming up stone floors, which, if otherwise laid directly onto a concrete screed, will feel a few degrees lower than the ambient room temperature, even in a well insulated home with central heating. Stone is a good conductor of heat. Because it has a high thermal mass, it will absorb heat slowly and release it gradually, avoiding temperature swings. This is particularly welcome for bathroom floors.



Buyer's Guide

CLOCKWISE FROM  
OPPOSITE Old Tuscan  
travertine flooring in  
Light Walnut with a  
chiselled edge, from  
£97.75 per square  
metre, Fired Earth; Di  
Scacchi tumbled  
marble, from £49.75  
per square metre,  
Mandarin Stone; Nero  
river slate, from £20  
per square metre,  
Mandarin Stone; Bitter  
Chocolate limestone,  
quarried from white  
limestone and contains  
bitumen from  
underground oil beds,  
£150 per square metre,  
De Ferranti; Vix Blue  
limestone, £107 per  
square metre,  
Smallbone Stone.

